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by Lauran Paine

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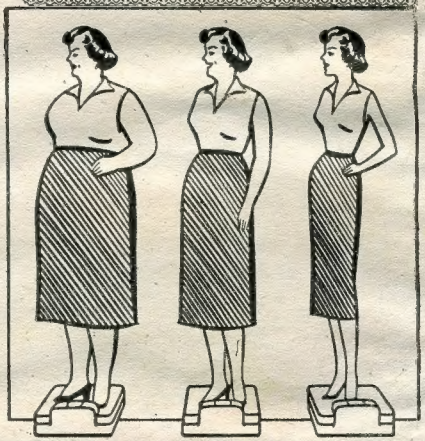

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MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Asso. Ed.* CLIFF CAMPBELL, *Asso. Ed.*

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Monk Muncrief would find himself trapped by three federal marshals when he returned to Alicia Martin in Tombstone. That is, if the marshals were trapped by the glittering temptations of that hell-roaring town — trapped into betraying their trust...

TOMBSTONE TRAP

FEATURE NOVEL OF LAWMAN'S HONOR

by Roe Richmond

SOME ASSIGNMENT, thought Riford Hyland with mild bitterness. *Banner's handed out some sweet ones before, but this one's liable to top them all.* To sit around and wait in a roaring hellhole like Tombstone, Arizona, for an outlaw killer to come back to his common-law wife—with a couple of characters like Dermid and Vennett on his hands. He was supposed to keep Beef Dermid off the bottle, and Jack Vennett away from the women. Tombstone was a great place in which to prevent grown men from indulging in their pet vices; there was more red liquor and loose women in Tombstone than anywhere else in the West, in this year of 1880. Some assignment, for sure.

They had left the train at the railhead in Deming, bought supplies and packed their saddlebags, saddled up the horses that had been freighted in, and started riding westward toward the Dragoons, and San Pedro Valley, and the boomtown of Tombstone. They were three men of widely-diversified appearance and temperament, wearing rough utilitarian range garb, their canteens clinking and ropes looped from the saddle bows, slicker-wrapped bedrolls strapped behind cantles. Their role was to be a trio of drifting riders, headed for the rich silver mines and gaudy pleasure-palaces of the city that

had mushroomed as a living monument to prospector Ed Schieffelin, maker of the first strike. And the stern, towering shadow of old Mike Banner seemed to be on them as they rode.

It was a big case, of course; otherwise the government wouldn't be sending three U. S. Deputy Marshals on it. An army paymaster's wagon had been held up on its way to Fort Huachuca; the escort was shot down, the driver and paymaster murdered, and approximately $100,000 stolen by four outlaws. Only one trooper had survived the massacre; he had positively identified one of the bandits as Monk Muncrief, a notorious gunman. It was learned that Muncrief's woman—a handsome blonde named Alicia Martin—was living in Tombstone, and that sooner or later Monk always returned to her, regardless of danger.

The mission Rife Hyland headed was to lie in wait for Muncrief, take him alive, and get to the other three robbers through him. It was likely that the quartet had separated—temporarily at least—after the holdup. It was equally probable that they would reunite, as soon as they thought it safe; and a swarming, overcrowded, lawless helltown like Tombstone was an ideal hideout for men on the dodge.

"I got a hunch Banner will blow into town soon after we do," said Jack Vennett, tall, darkly handsome, polished and debonair; he sat in his saddle with the same easy, swaggering grace with which he walked.

"Maybe he's there already," Beef Dermid suggested, shifting his broad bulk in the scorching sweated leather; innocent blue eyes squinted in his raw red face, unruly brown hair curling damply under his hat.

Vennett laughed, a gay lilting sound that always held a note of insolent mockery. "Old Mike don't trust anybody—except maybe Hyland."

"You flatter me, Jack," drawled Rife Hyland. A high, lank figure on his mottled gray gelding, he was lean and loose-jointed, with a sharp-featured angular bronze face, eyes of pure green, and tawny cropped hair beneath the rakish tilt of his hat.

"I wouldn't say so, Rife," protested Vennett, in mock gravity. "Your devotion has earned you that trust; your loyalty's a touchin' thing. You deserve every bit of the faith Mike Banner has in you, boy."

"Thanks, Jack; I had no idea you appreciaated such things."

Beef Dermid snorted and splashed tobacco juice over the sand and bunchgrass. "Cut it out, you two. Ain't we got enough trouble, without you damn fools chawin' each other up."

"Why, we're real fond of each other, Beef," said Vennett, with his charming dimple-creased smile.

Hyland nodded solemnly. "Nobody knows how fond, and that's a fact."

Dermid grunted and spat again. "Well, I always wanted to hit Tombstone, but not on a job like this."

"We'll have our fun too, Beef," promised Jack Vennett. "We're lucky to have a good hard-workin' boy like Hyland with us to ease our burden."

RIFE HYLAND regarded Vennett with cool malice, but said nothing. They never had liked one another and never would, but thus far there had been no open hostilities. Vennett had his good points, Hyland admitted; Vennett was fearless, quick-thinking, fast with a gun, and icy calm under pressure. He could back up his swagger with bare hands, or a Colt or Winchester.

Hyland liked Beef Dermid as much as he disliked Vennett, in spite of Beef's obvious faults. Dermid was essentially honest and sincere; but he had a weakness for whiskey that couldn't be held in abeyance for any sustained length of time. That failing had nearly been fatal to Hyland, as well as to Dermid himself; yet it hadn't changed Rife's feeling for the broad-shouldered husky man. The liking be-

had orders not to involve themselves with the local peace officers here. Wyatt Earp was talking with the slender, immaculate, scholarly-looking Doc Holliday; standing nearby were his brothers, Virgil and Morgan. Some of the Clanton and McLowery boys passed, exchanging casual salutes and greetings with the Earp group, while onlookers sighed with mingled relief and disappointment.

JOHN BEHAN, the pompous sheriff, came along with his fresh-faced smiling young deputy, Billy Breakenridge, and Behan glared after the Clantons and McLowerys as he paused to speak to Wyatt Earp. Tromping on in heavy-footed dignity, Behan spotted Hyland and his companions lounging about an awning post. He stopped and eyed them with smug disdain, barking: "Three more saddle tramps in town! What's your business here?"

"Just that," drawled Rife Hyland; "our business."

"You look like trouble-makers to me!" the sheriff stormed.

Jack Vennett laughed. "We don't dodge it, lawman."

"We don't hunt it either," Hyland put in.

"Well, watch your step in this town," Behan said, bristling with indignation. "Come on, Billy; we can't waste time on this riffraff." He stomped away in a ridiculous strut. Breakenridge wore a half-disgusted expression as he walked after the sheriff, Vennett's laughter trailing them down the awninged arcade.

The Earps and Holliday scanned them as they turned away, and Jack Vennett murmured: "I wonder if that Wyatt Earp's as good as they claim; he don't look like so much to me."

"I wouldn't call him, if I was you," Hyland said dryly. "If he could keep the peace in Dodge, at its worst, he must be pretty fair."

"A lot of these gunnies get by on their reputation," Vennett declared.

"Not for long," disagreed Hyland. "There's always some cocky young punk cravin' to try them out; a man with a rep has to be ready to back it up, right around the clock."

"We'd have reps if we wasn't government agents."

"Who wants one?" drawled Rife. "Life's rough enough without carryin' a big name around on your back. Take Earp, for instance; he can't be much over thirty, and he looks like a man of fifty."

"He still looks plenty tough to me," Beef Dermid said.

"Sure, and he is," Hyland agreed. "Look at Mike Banner, for that matter; he is over fifty, but he's still tougher'n a steer." His tone was respectful whenever he mentioned their boss, the United States Marshal of Arizona.

They were smoking cigars on the porch of the Cosmopolitan Hotel, when a woman swept past in a wave of rare perfume. She was tall, statuesque, full-blown and smartly gowned, with sculptured features and a proud golden head. She walked with queenly grace and poise, men's eyes followed her hungrily. Jack Vennett's face lighted, and his patrician nostrils quivered. He turned to a small derby-hatted man, who looked like a traveling salesman. "Who's the lady, friend?"

"Alicia Martin," the drummer said. "But they say she's spoken for, brother—by one of the fastest guns in the country."

"You scare me to death, friend," said Vennett, wheeling with a gay, reckless grin to Hyland and Dermid, and lowering his voice: "There's our woman, boys. Banner told me to gain her confidence, remember? I'm goin' to enjoy this job a lot more'n I expected to!"

"Don't rush it," advised Hyland. "And don't overdo it either, Jack; we've got to play this slow and careful."

Vennett laughed gaily. "You don't

tween them was instinctive, as was the cold curbed hatred between Hyland and Vennett.

They rode on across semi-arid sage and alkali flats, bristling with mesquite, chaparral and cactus, and over sunblasted desert wastes, brilliant with fantastic flowering and barbed vegetation. Staghorn cactus was abloom along with golden gilia; white blossomed Spanish bayonet glittered amidst greasewood and creosote brush. Groves of spike-branched ironwood and tarragon shaded the bases of red-stone buttes and sharp-profiled mesas. There were graceful-wanded ocotillos, cruel-spined chollas, yellow and green mescals with lofty starlike white flowers.

The silver rush was still on, and the riders passed canvas-hooded caravans, ox teams, mule teams, pack trains, and other horsemen in pairs or groups, all bound for the fabulous San Pedro. Here and there were burned-out homesteads, ranches, and the charred ruins of wagons, where the Apaches had struck. The bones of humans and animals, residue of the rush for silver, were bleaching from the bleak Mogollon Plateau to the barren sands of the Camino del Diablo.

They climbed and threaded through Dragoon Gap and dropped into the valley of the San Pedro, leaving the Dragoons behind them and facing the massive Chiricahuas and Huachucas piled high on the west. Tombstone, a magic city of about 15,000, was a riot of lights and crowds and noise in the evening, when they rode into the main drag of Allen Street. The wide thoroughfare rumbled with the traffic of heavy sixteen-mule ore wagons from the mines, great lumber carts from the sawmills, stages, buckboards, emigrant wagons, buggies, horsemen, and pedestrians.

Leaving their mounts and gear in the O. K. Corral, they walked the chaotic length of Allen to the Bird Cage Opera House at the other end. Tough Nut and Fremont Streets, flanking Allen, were as broad and busy and garish as the main thoroughfare. It was amazing to come upon such a town in the desert wilderness, Rife Hyland reflected. They had drinks in the mirrored mahogany-and-brass splendour of the *Crystal Palace,* the *Oriental,* and the *Alhambra,* where people from every stratum of society milled about under tremendous crystal-shimmering chandeliers.

Walking about to limber their saddle-cramped limbs, they stared at other famous landmarks of Tombstone. The Can Can and Maison Doree, noted for fine food. Three large, elegant hotels: the Cosmopolitan, Grand, and Occidental, and smaller but equally colorful ones like Nellie Cashman's Russ House... The *St. Louis Beer Hall,* and Dutch Annie's celebrated bordello, and the *Schieffelin Hall.* A hilarious carnival atmosphere prevailed everywhere, for twenty-four hours a day. Hyland and Dermid felt slightly uncomfortable and out-of-place in such a mad, lavish turmoil, but Jack Vennett was fully at ease and at home here.

Snatches of conversation identified certain Tombstone celebrities for them, as they roamed about the streets and saloons. Buckskin Frank Leslie looked like anything but a deadly killer in his clean white apron behind the *Oriental* bar. John Ringo, the bad man, was tall, lean, silent and moody, fine-looking in a somber fashion; he drank hard and soberly as usual, courteous until he was crossed. With him was Curly Bill, the famed outlaw chief, hat pushed back on his dark curls, black eyes glinting with good-natured merriment, an easy jovial grin on his full swarthy features.

They saw Wyatt Earp, yellow-haired and gaunt-faced with sunken blue-gray eyes, a tawny mustache drooping over his strong heavy jaws. He had made his name as town marshal of Dodge City in the Texas trail-drive days; he was now a U. S. Deputy Marshal, but they

have to tell me how to handle women, son."

Ignoring this, Rife Hyland thoughtfully studied the setting of the Cosmopolitan. There were lesser and cheaper hotels on either side of this three-story structure. They'd have to find out where Alicia Martin's room was located. With luck they might acquire a room in one of the adjacent hostelries, from which they could watch her windows. But thinking of Vennett with Alicia, Hyland didn't like the setup at all. For once, it seemed as if old Mike Banner hadn't exercised good judgment. Vennett could get into enough woman-trouble, without a directive from headquarters, and that cool blonde Alicia didn't look like a flighty, empty-headed female, by any means.

Then there was Beef Dermid and his thirst, in this town that had bars everywhere you turned or glanced. Hyland could see trouble ahead, lots of it and all bad.

"After tonight we won't hang around together much in public," he said.

"Now that's a shame," Vennett put in. "I'll sure miss you two boys, but maybe Alicia will take your place."

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RIFE HYLAND sat hunched in a chair by the window of the unlighted room, elbows on knees and pipe in teeth, staring across the street at the glowing windows that marked Alicia Martin's room in the Cosmopolitan. Lying on one of the beds, hands clasped behind shaggy head, Beef Dermid eyed the ceiling in dreary boredom, shifting fretfully from time to time. Hyland was feeling restless, too—fed up to the ears with inactivity.

They had been in Tombstone a week, and nothing had happened. Jack Vennett had bought some new clothes to impress Alicia, but so far he had made no progress with her, much to his own astonishment. When Dermid ragged him about it, Vennett said, "She ain't human, that's all; she just ain't human."

Vennett was out somewhere this evening, dressed up like a dude in a store suit, and Hyland knew that sooner or later he'd get into some kind of a jam. Alicia Martin seemed to lead a completely isolated life. Nobody visited her, and when she went out she called on no one. She just walked about aimlessly, as if to get fresh air and exercise, sometimes stopping in stores to make small purchases. Once she left the hotel in a riding habit, hired a horse from the O. K. Corral, and rode out of town. Trailing her discreetly on his big gray, Hyland thought she was heading for the outlaw stronghold of Galeyville in the San Simon; but she turned back and apparently had no objective at all.

"It must be love," Rife muttered, leaning back in his chair. "She's sure bein' true to that murderin' Muncrief; I wonder if Monk knows how true she is."

"He probably wouldn't believe it," Dermid said; "probably come back and beat hell out of her, if we don't take him first. But it sure tickled me to see Vennett get froze out there. Reckon Jack's turned to the percentage girls by now, or taken to visitin' Dutch Annie's."

"It's likely," Hyland assented gloomily, "that he'll get in a shootin' scrape over some floozie and mess up everythin'."

"It don't seem fair," grumbled Beef. "He's out havin' fun for himself, while we roost in this damn dark room everynight. We could at least have a bottle up here, Rife."

"I get thirsty too, Beef," confessed Hyland. "But the time for drinkin's

after we get Muncrief and his partners."

"They might of breezed to Mexico, Rife; maybe Monk won't ever come back here."

"He'll come back after that woman."

"Well, I don't know as I blame him for that," Beef Dermid said. "She's a whole lot of woman, Rife, and she must love that joker, like you say."

"Either that or he's got somebody watchin' her, and she don't dare to step out," Hyland mused.

"That could be," said Dermid. "A gal like her ain't apt to be much purer than the driven snow. Come to think of it, she didn't get that hard wise look from settin' alone in hotel rooms."

"I reckon not, Beef," drawled Hyland. "But whoever's watchin' her for Muncrief must be an expert. I haven't been able to spot anybody—yet."

"It wouldn't be easy, Rife, with so damn many people millin' around all over the place. A man could keep out of sight pretty easy, if he put his mind to it."

The windows across the way went suddenly dark, and Hyland straightened up swearing softly. "Damned if I know whether she went out or went to bed. Wasn't watchin', but I'm goin' out and make sure, Beef. You stay here and keep an eye on those windows. Monk might come anytime, you know; better sit up in a chair so you won't be fallin' asleep."

"All right, all right, Rife," groaned Dermid, swinging his legs off the bed.

"Quit cryin', Beef," grinned Hyland, at the door. "You're drawin' full pay and expense money for doin' nothin'."

"Yeah, and you won't let me spend a damn cent of it," Dermid said. "Not even on the necessities of life, like liquor and the gals at Dutch Annie's."

OUT IN THE street Rife Hyland hastened on long legs toward the facade of the Cosmopolitan, arriving in time to see Alicia Martin emerge from the lobby and vanish into the ceaseless riptide of humanity on the boardwalk. He took after her, twisting and thrusting through the massed bodies, towering over most of the throng and wishing for once he wasn't so tall. It was a struggle, but Hyland kept within sight of her under the wooden awnings.

Alicia went straight to the Bird Cage Opera House, paused at the box office, and went inside. Hyland bought a twenty-five cent general admission ticket and followed her in. The long bar was lined three or four deep, and the wooden benches on the main floor were packed solid-full. On the stage, in the yellow flare of kerosene footlights, a chorus was dancing the can-can, and the male audience roared appreciatively over their whiskey glasses and beer mugs into the dense haze of tobacco smoke. A double tier of curtained booths formed a horseshoe about the three walls, and in the semi-privacy of these stalls the elite reveled.

Alicia Martin had climbed the stairs to the right. The attendant stopped Hyland and pointed firmly to the main floor, then let him pass as Rife pressed a bill into the man's perspiring palm. Ailcia was disappearing into a booth near the front of the gallery when Hyland reached the top of the stairway. He moved forward and peeped through the drapes. She was alone in the stall, sitting like a young queen. The can-can was over, and the master-of-ceremonies was announcing Mr. James Holly and Miss Lola Cory, America's Own Specialty Stars, to be followed by "Our Own Petite Star, Miss Annie Duncan, the Tombstone Nightingale."

Hyland hesitated on the verge of parting the curtains and stepping inside. Better wait awhile and see what happened. Monk Muncrief or one of his confederates might join her here. Hyland was withdrawing when he sensed another presence, and whirled to see a gorilla-like form shambling toward him with purposeful menace,

overlong arms elbowed out, great knobby hands brushing the lowslung gun butts on either bowed leg.

"I wouldn't foller that lady any more if I was you," the man said, in a hoarse rasp.

"It's your business?" Hyland asked quietly.

"I'm makin' it mine. Git outa here, Stringbean, before you git yourself hurt—real bad."

"Who the hell are you anyway?"

"Names don't mean nothin' in Tombstone. Beat it, boy; take the air. You git me mad I'll snap your spine."

Hyland shook his high fair head. "I don't take kindly to bein' ordered around, and I was here first. Suppose you breeze out yourself, apeman."

The squat gorilla came in snarling, ready to crush Hyland in those terrible arms; he moved with alarming speed, but Rife was quicker. Stabbing his left fist into that grotesquely ugly face, Rife Hyland's right hand flashed up with the long-barreled Colt in it. Whipping his wrist, he slashed the steel barrel wickedly across the man's oversized head. Floundering on his knees, the gorilla was still conscious and groping for his guns now. Hyland struck again, a terrific hammering blow, beating the man face down and senseless on the floor of the dim corridor.

The curtains of the booth were flung aside; Alicia Martin came out and stood staring with wide dilated eyes, her face frozen.

"You know him, ma'am?" Hyland drawled. "I sure don't know why he jumped me."

Her head glimmered golden in the vague light, as she shook it in violent denial, but Hyland knew it was a lie. In a shaking voice, she said: "You'd better leave. You look like a nice boy; please go before you get hurt!"

"He won't be hurtin' me, ma'am." Hyland's grin was boyish. Might as well string along with her conception of him.

"Someone else will, if you don't get out of here!" She glanced about, nervous and distraught. "Please go; please hurry! Before he comes to, or somebody else gets here."

"I ain't such a kid as you may think," Hyland said, playing his role of simplicity to the hilt. "I can take pretty good care of myself, ma'am."

Alicia Martin gestured with overwrought impatience. "Get out, you fool, get out! Before I start screaming!"

"I'll go, I'll go," Hyland said hastily. "Sorry, ma'am; I hope your friend ain't hurt too bad."

Her eyes and features hardened, her full lips curled. "Hurt? Him?" She laughed, with a trace of hysteria. "You couldn't hurt him, sonny. He'll tear you to pieces, if he ever gets his hands on you. Get out, you great gawking idiot!"

RIFE HYLAND left her standing there over the apelike form sprawled on the worn carpet. He went down the stairs and outdoors, and the night air felt fresh and clean on his sweaty face. *Quite a girl there,* he thought wryly. *She can be sweet and gentle, and she can be harder than a cold chisel. My last hunch was right: Muncrief's got that gorilla watching her; she don't like it, and she's plenty scared.*

Well, he had learned that much, at any rate. Muncrief had at least one associate in town, and Alicia's virtue was not wholly self-imposed. That would gratify Vennett, if he knew it... Hyland wondered if the apeman had been in on the payroll robbery. It was possible, but not probable; a full partner in the deal wouldn't be risking his neck to act as Monk's watchdog. But that gorilla would bear watching. *The next time I see that monster,* thought Hyland, with an inward shudder of revulsion, *I'd better throw some lead into him right away.*

Hyland was walking toward the ho-

tels when he heard a scuffling commotion in an alley, and the muffled scream of a woman. Passersby paid no attention to such trivial matters in this community, but Hyland turned back and peered into the shadowy passage where a girl and man were struggling. Probably a husband and wife having it out, he decided; then a slant of lamplight from somewhere fell on the feminine face and showed stark terror. She looked familiar, too, and Hyland was puzzled until it came to him. She was the dark vivid girl who occupied the room next to Alicia Martin's in the Cosmopolitan. He had often seen her, sometimes through the field-glasses, on his nightly vigils.

Rife Hyland strode toward the couple in the alley, easing his gun in its oiled sheath. "I reckon the lady don't want to wrastle," he drawled; "turn her loose, brother."

The man slammed the girl back against the wall, and spun on Hyland, his good-looking features drawn taut and harsh. A young man, not up to Hyland's six-four height but tall and well-built, sinewy and easy-moving. "This is private, mister," he said through his even white teeth. "Don't horn in here; get on back where you came from."

"Where I come from," drawled Hyland, "we don't fight women."

The other cursed and said: "If you want a fight, you came to the right party. Get the hell out, or start reachin'!"

"I wouldn't call this a shootin' matter," said Hyland.

"You want it with the bare hands, Beanpole? Well, come on, let's go!"

The girl cried, "No, Mel! Please don't, Mel!..." But he was already rushing in, ripping away with both hands. Rife Hyland backed off and covered up, taking most of them on his elbows and shoulders, a few punches reaching his head with jarring force. When Mel swung himself arm-weary, off balance and wide open, Hyland struck back with sudden power and precision.

HITTING straightaway and hard, getting his shoulders and back into them, Rife Hyland felt the jolting shocks tingle up his arms, and saw Mel's hands drop as his head jerked back and forth. He sank a left into the waistline, then slid back and set himself as Mel gasped and doubled forward. Pouring everything from the legs up into his right fist, Hyland landed solidly under the jawbone, twisting Mel's neck as if it were broken. Mel lurched backward headlong, his skull thumping the wall, bouncing off, his whole body crumpling slackly into the dirt and debris of the alley.

Making sure the man was out cold, Hyland turned to the girl cowering on the opposite adobe. "Come on, miss; I'll walk you home." They walked out with the girl clinging tight to his arm, and Hyland could feel the vibrant trembling of her firm lithe figure. She was pretty, even in panic, in an unusual striking way that a man would remember, and she smelled clean and fragrant.

"I—I didn't think—you could do it," she faltered, glancing up at his lean hollow-cheeked face with its sharp prominent nose and jutting cheekbones and jaws.

Rife Hyland smiled. "Lots of folks get fooled, I guess. Who was he anyway?"

"Mel Orville. I—I thought he was a nice boy. Until tonight."

"One of those wolves in sheep's clothin', huh?" drawled Hyland, and told her his name.

"I'm Dolly Mayforth," she said; "and I'm more grateful than I can say, Mr. Hyland."

"The name's Rife and it was purely a pleasure," Hyland said. "Where do you live?"

"Right nearby. I'm staying at the Cosmopolitan."

"Too nearby," he remarked, as they

arrived at the hotel. "Can I see you up to your room?"

"Yes, of course. But I—I'm afraid I can't ask you in—Rife."

Hyland laughed softly. "That's all right, Dolly; I wouldn't know how to act in a girl's room anyway."

Upstairs on the second floor they loitered before her door, and Hyland said: "Don't you get lonesome, livin' like this?"

"Sometimes," Dolly admitted. "But there's a very nice lady next door. Beautiful too, a natural blonde; her name's Mrs. Martin."

"Divorced maybe? Or a widow?"

"No, her husband's away on a business trip. She expects him back before long, I guess."

"Then you won't have any company here, Dolly?"

"I'm afraid not, Rife," the girl said. "They're planning to go East, I believe."

"Maybe you'll let me see you once in awhile?" Hyland suggested, smiling down at her in his frank easy manner. He looked like a gangling overgrown kid with short-cut sandy blond hair, keen boyish features, clear green eyes, and outsized hands that were raw-knuckled at present.

"I'd like that very much, Rife," said Dolly Mayforth.

"It's a deal then, Dolly." Hyland grinned with shy pleasure, and took her shapely hand in his big brown one. "If that Orville pesters you again, let me know. I'm stoppin' next door in the Silver City House. Good night, Dolly."

"Good night, Rife—and thanks again. I don't think Mel will bother me any more; there are too many other girls in Tombstone."

After Dolly disappeared into Number 25, Hyland put his hat back on, stared briefly at the adjacent Number 27 in which Alicia Martin lived, and turned toward the front stairway. Meeting Dolly might prove a lucky break, and Rife was glad to have met her for more personal reasons. He had made more headway than Vennett anyhow... Hyland decided to step into the Cosmopolitan barroom for a drink, before going back to his own hotel.

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THE SWING doors were still swaying from Hyland's passage into the hotel bar, when Jack Vennett entered the lobby of the Cosmopolitan with Alicia Martin on his arm. They made a handsome couple, the tall dark man and the stately blonde woman, as they crossed the room and climbed the stairs with the calm assurance that was habitual to both of them, oblivious to the turning heads and staring eyes.

In the second floor corridor, Vennett regarded Alicia's full flowing curves with approval, as she bent over to unlock the door. She was straightening when the door to 25 opened, and Dolly Mayforth stood there, surprised and abashed to find Alicia with an escort.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Dolly said. "I thought you were alone, Alicia." She started to withdraw at once.

"That's quite all right, dear," said Alicia, masking her annoyance. "Won't you join us for a few minutes?"

"No, thanks; I was just going to say hello—and good night."

"Good night, Dolly," Alicia said kindly, and grimaced after the door closed behind the trim, slender, dark-haired girl. They went into 27, and Alicia carefully drew the shades before Vennett lighted a lamp. "Too bad she had to see you, Jack."

Vennett shrugged. "It don't matter much. She wouldn't know me, or the other boys. Kind of attractive, isn't she?"

Alicia nodded grudgingly. "If you like them that young and simple."

Vennett laughed and gathered her into his arms, her mouth lifting eagerly to his, and they stood enwrapped in a long fierce embrace, their bodies moulded full-length together. Holding her back then, Vennett smiled down at her with all his dimpled charm. "Hyland don't know what a favor he did for me tonight, Alicia. I thought I'd have to take care of Berkoff myself, before I could get into that booth; but good old Riford did it for me."

"Where does he get the strength?" laughed Alicia. "He looks as if a good wind would blow him away."

"That skinny frame of his has crossed up a lot of people," Vennett said. "Don't ever underrate Rife Hyland; that long drink of water is pure dynamite and hellfire."

VENNETT had been seeing Alicia Martin in snatched moments, unbeknown to his fellow agents, and tonight he had joined her in that gallery booth in the Bird Cage, after the gun-whipped Hunk Berkoff had been carried away unconscious.

His mind went to that $100,000 payroll, which Monk Muncrief and his followers had lifted from the bullet-scarred paymaster's wagon in that murderous holdup. Monk, as the leader, would probably have nearly half that sum on him when he came to Tombstone after this blonde woman. Certainly enough to set Vennett up for life, if he handled it right.

It didn't take Vennett long to discover that Alicia was dissatisfied with Muncrief, and would have broken away from him, if it hadn't been for that money and her fear of Monk. She resented his jealous possessiveness, and found it maddening to have the gargantuan Hunk Berkoff spying on her every move.

Ripe for a new romance, Alicia was intrigued by Vennett's dark arrogant good-looks, fascinated by his swashbuckling manner. Even as he caressed her now, a scheme was formulating in Vennett's brain... Sensing his detachment, the woman freed herself and went to pour drinks from a cutglass decanter. Vennett watched the gracefull seductive sway of her splendid hips, and smiled with satisfaction.

Drinks in hand, Alicia sat down in a chair and crossed her long beautiful legs; Vennett seated himself on the edge of the bed. They toasted one another silently, and after sipping the brandy Alicia said: "Won't your friends think it strange my shades are drawn?"

Vennett frowned, thinking that liquor must have loosened his tongue the night he revealed so much to her. Then his laugh rippled out like lilting music. "A girl has a right to some modesty, Alicia; I don't think they're on duty anyway. Hyland was out, we know, and I caught a glimpse of Dermid sneakin' some drinks in the *Alhambra*." *If Dermid gets to hitting the bottle,* he mused, *I'll maneuver him in with me, so I'll have him to pin the blame on, if anything goes wrong.*

Alicia Martin finished her drink, and walked toward Vennett with softly shining hazel eyes and parted scarlet lips.

WHEN RIFE HYLAND got back to the darkened room in the Silver City House, Beef Dermid was missing but the high broad form of old Mike Banner rose surprisingly to greet him. Still rugged, powerful and ramrod straight, Banner was a striking figure in well-cut clothes, his gray hair and mustache contrasting with his ruddy sun-burnished face, chiseled in distinguished strong-boned planes and angles.

He was angry now; it showed in the deep-set faded eyes and the thrust of his gray head and iron jaws, but his voice was evenly restrained. "What's going on here, Rife? You're supposed to keep a twenty-four hour watch. I get here and find this room empty. Where's Dermid? Where's Vennett?

Where were you?"

Hyland felt his cheeks flush warmly and his ears burn in the dimness; he told Banner about trailing Alicia to the Bird Cage Opera House and what had happened there, and described the incident that occurred on his way back.

"A girl, eh?" said Mike Banner. "Are you getting the fever like Vennett, Rife? I suppose he's out chasing skirts somewhere."

"You told him to gain Alicia Martin's confidence, Mike."

"I didn't tell him to work on every chippie in every dive in Tombstone," Banner said coldly. "What about Dermid? Out tanking up somewhere, I reckon."

Hyland was silent. He wanted to defend Beef, but he didn't know how to do it or what to say. There was little use in lying to Mike Banner. If you didn't know the answers, it was better to keep your mouth shut.

"I ought to pull you three off this job and send in somebody else, or turn it over to Wyatt Earp."

"We'll handle it, Mike," said Hyland, with desperation.

"You've bungled it so far, Rife." Banner gestured at the window with a great arm. "That woman drew her shades before she lighted the lamps tonight. Does she always do that?"

Hyland shook his tawny head. "Never did before."

"Somebody's with her then, and it might be Muncrief. He could've come and gone, and you boys never would've known it."

That damned Dermid, thought Hyland. *He ought to know better than to leave this place empty. Mike would have to arrive at the worst possible time...* "You want me to go cover her room, Mike?"

"Somebody certainly should," Banner said caustically. "And you seem to be the only one available."

Hyland gave his gun belt a hitch, saying with some relief: "I'll get right over there."

"Remember, Rife, we want Muncrief alive. It's our only chance of identifying the other three."

"I know, Mike; if he's there I'll take him alive."

Mike Banner smiled without humor. "If you stumble over Dermid in the gutter, or find Vennett tangled up with some skirt, send them up here. Those boys are really going to get their ears blistered. I've overlooked a lot of things in the past, but this case is different. I knew that paymaster and driver, and some of the soldiers. And a hundred thousand dollars is a lot of money, even to the United States Government."

Hyland nodded, saluted, and left Banner pacing the dark floor. On the front veranda he met Beef Dermid, and observed immediately that Beef had tossed down quite a few. "You take anythin' for your breath, Beef?" he demanded.

"Why should I?" countered Dermid. "The smell of whiskey never bothered you much, as I remember."

"It bothers Mike Banner," said Hyland. "He's upstairs waitin' for you."

Dermid moaned aloud and swore in soft despair. "Wouldn't you know it? Ain't I the luckiest man in the world? The first time I break over, Banner shows up. How the hell can you win, Rife?"

"You can't win full of whiskey, Beef," said Hyland. "Get yourself a cigar and light up before you go in the room. And keep your lip buttoned, no matter how bad he gives it to you."

Dermid nodded dejectedly. "Don't worry, Rife. I know better'n to talk back to Mike Banner... Where you goin', Rife?"

"Got to cover Alicia's room; she pulled the shades first thing tonight."

"Take me with you, Rife," pleaded Dermid.

"Get upstairs and take your medicine," Hyland said. "I had to take

mine without any company or help." He turned toward the Cosmopolitan, and Dermid shuffled sadly into the Silver City House.

ON THE SLAT sidewalk in front of the Cosmo, Hyland encountered Jack Vennett, who inquired as to his destination.

"Somebody's in the room with Alicia," explained Hyland.

"Somebody was, you mean," Vennett said; "they're gone now."

"How do you know?"

"I was watchin'. I earn my money part of the time, Rife, same as you do."

"Who was it?" asked Hyland sharply.

"A man, middle-aged or so," Vennett said. "He walked her home from the Bird Cage, and she probably gave him a drink in the room. Then he left. A well-dressed, harmless-lookin', little old jasper."

"You're sure, Jack?"

"Hell, yes! Would I be makin' up fairy stories, Rife?"

Rife Hyland sighed. "Well, maybe that'll make Banner feel a little better. He thought she might have Monk up there."

"Mike Banner?" said Vennett, with an audible intake of breath. "Is Mike here?"

"Up in the room waitin' now," Hyland said grimly. "The room was empty when Mike got there, and he's burnin' considerable."

"That damn rumhound of a Dermid," said Vennett, cursing viciously.

"What about you, Jack? Mike isn't too happy over you either."

"I was on duty, wasn't I?"

"Mike don't think so," Hyland said.

Jack Vennett flared up: "What about yourself, Hyland? I understand you slugged a couple of guys tonight. Real tough hombres, too; the kind that'll make trouble. And I'm supposed to be the one who gets in all the ruckuses!"

"Who were they, Jack?"

"Hunk Berkoff and Mel Orville. Two hardcase gents, they tell me."

"I had to belt them, Jack," said Rife Hyland. "Either that or gunplay. They forced it and I had to hit back."

"How would Mike like to hear about that, boy?" jeered Vennett.

"You're a little late; I already told him the whole story."

Vennett was visibly disappointed, but he attempted to cover it with reckless scornful laughter. "Well, come on, Riford; let's go back and get our ears chewed off. A man sure has to take a lot, for the kind of chickenfeed they pay in this business."

IN THE ROOM they found Beef Dermid hunched miserably on a corner chair, flayed into raw abject submission by Banner's tongue-lashing, elbows on knees and tousled brown head bowed into his hands. They made their report, and Mike Banner turned to unload on Vennett with quiet, biting, searing invective, with an icy contempt that made the proud Vennett squirm and writhe inside.

In conclusion, Mike said: "I can't stay here now, but I'll be back, hoping to find the situation improved on my next visit. Dermid, I'm giving you one more chance to lay off the booze and carry your end of the job. Hyland can't lug you on his back forever. Vennett, so far as you're concerned from now on, there's only one female in Tombstone. Her name is Alicia Martin, and the idea is to learn what you can about Monk Muncrief and his associates, not to indulge in one of your flaming love affairs. Hyland, if you can't keep these boys in line, you're as much of a failure as they are."

Mike Banner paused to let his words sink in, and went on: "Muncrief has been seen in Galeyville recently. Any day or night now, he'll be coming into Tombstone. It's more essential than ever to watch Alicia Martin every minute around the clock.

Rife, follow up your lead with that Mayforth girl, and get the run of her room, if you can manage it. Watch out for Berkoff and Orville; they might try to gun you... Well, I reckon that does it. Good luck, boys." He shook hands all around, and departed as abruptly as he had come.

Jack Vennett stared at the door and shook his crisp dark head. "How the hell does he get to know *everythin'?* Has he got spies scattered all over Arizona, or can he see across deserts and through mountains? You'd think he'd been with me ever since we got here."

"Yeah," mumbled Beef Dermid. "He can even tell the brand of whiskey you drink, how many you had, and whether the bartender had hair or skin on his head!"

"Have to work eight-hour shifts here," Rife Hyland said thoughtfully. "One man watchin', another sleepin', the third on the outside."

"I'll take all night tomorrow," Vennett said, surprisingly. "And give both you boys the night off for a change."

"Hell, there's nowhere for me to go," Beef Dermid said mournfully, "now that I can't drink, and Mike has made Dutch Annie's out-of-bounds."

"Well, Rife can go and promote that Mayforth girl," Vennett said. "I'll stay here anyway and keep you company, Beef."

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RIFE HYLAND was dining with Dolly Mayforth in the Maison Doree, on the excellent two-inch thick steaks for which the restaurant was noted. Easy, friendly and comfortable together, talking and laughing freely, it seemed as if they had known one another for years. Dazzling white linen covered the tables, with genuine silver and fragile glassware gleaming under the soft lamplight. Low sweet background music was provided by a small orchestra. Julius Caesar, the grossly fat and jovial proprietor, florid-faced and beaming above his three chins, moved about greeting customers, suggesting rare dishes and wines, and inquiring anxiously about the cooking and the service. Suave jolly Julius Caesar, who was to grow exceedingly wealthy in this famed cafe, only to gamble it all away at faro, and to end up running a cheap lunch counter in Benson.

Hyland, in a new store suit, clean-shaven with his blond hair cropped close and his green eyes clear and merry, had the scrubbed glowing look of a boy dressed up for Sunday meeting, and Dolly's dark eyes were warm and appreciative on him. Julius Caesar, drawn by Dolly Mayforth's fresh beauty and natural charm, spent some time hovering over them, and ordered up his finest Napoleon brandy to go with their coffee.

With Dolly's permission, Rife Hyland lighted a long thin cigar and settled back with a sigh of satisfaction. "Somethin' to be said for civilization after all. Especially in a frontier boom-town, Dolly."

"It's wonderful, Rife. I don't know when I've enjoyed myself so much."

As they chatted idly on, Hyland's thoughts turned to Vennett and Dermid. He was puzzled by Vennett's volunteering to stand watch tonight. It wasn't like that young blade, in the least. He must have had some ulterior motive, but Hyland couldn't figure out what it might be. There had been a change in Vennett, of that Rife was certain. The opulent riches and luxurious high-life of Tombstone had altered his standards somehow. Perhaps Vennett had come to crave wealth, whereas in the past he had only lusted after women... Hyland steered the conversation to Alicia Martin. "How's

your beautiful blonde neighbor, Dolly?"

"Ah, I see where your interest really lies!" the girl said. "You're just humoring me and hoping to get an introduction to Alicia. Well, she is lovely and smart and sophisticated. At times she makes me feel like a silly child."

"She hadn't ought to, Dolly. You've got somethin' a lot better. How does she spend her time anyway? Ever have company or anythin' like that?"

"I didn't think so until last night. I opened the door when I heard her in the hall, and there was a man with her. A young man, tall and dark and handsome."

HYLAND straightened up and leaned forward. "Come again."

"What do you mean, Rife?"

"I heard she was with a small middle-aged man; are you sure you got a good look at him, Dolly?"

"Of course I am," Dolly Mayforth declared. "This man was young and good-looking, with a kind of swagger about him. Dark and charming and very sure of himself, I'd say."

"Well, well," Hyland murmured.

"What's the matter, Rife?" she asked, perplexed. "Someone you know?"

"I believe it was, Dolly, and I'm afraid I'll have to take you home early tonight." If Vennett had been seeing Alicia and lying about it, something was up for sure, and Hyland had to investigate it promptly. "Sorry, Dolly," he added absently.

"Why, that's all right, Rife. I just don't understand..."

"I'll explain—sometime," Hyland said. "Can't right now; are you ready to leave, Dolly?"

"Yes, I'm ready," she said quietly. "But I don't like all this mystery, Rife. And we were having such a pleasant time."

"I don't like it either." Hyland's tone was as somber as his lean high-boned features and green eyes. "And we'll have more and better times—afterward. But right now I've got to hurry, Dolly."

Julius Caesar himself bowed them out the door into the picket-fenced front yard that separated the Maison Doree from the clamoring rush of the street. The glare and din of Tombstone struck them in the face, raw, crude and raucous after that genteel dining room. Overhead the stars swarmed sparkling in the night-blue sky, and a golden crescent moon hung tilted above the Chiricahua Mountains.

Rife Hyland shoved Dolly aside and froze in his tracks, as a big rangy man stalked gracefully out of the shadows in their direction. It was Mel Orville, his face scarred by Hyland's knuckles, his eyes slitted fire and his bared teeth showing white. Hyland felt another presence behind him, but he couldn't take his fixed gaze off Orville.

"All right, High Pockets," said Mel Orville. "You had your fun last night; the time's come to pay up. Go for your iron!"

"I still say this isn't a shootin' matter," Hyland said.

"To me it is! You might as well reach. I'm goin' to cut you down anyway, Beanpole!" Orville's right elbow was out, his hand spread and clawed, and Hyland could see he was going to draw.

Orville's hand streaked with the skill and speed of long practice. Rife Hyland brushed back the skirt of his coat and raked his Colt out of the leather, cocking it on the upswing, thumbing the hammer forward as the barrel came level and lined. The gun blasted bright and loud, the muzzle flare stabbing the dimness, the .44 springing back and up against his wrist.

Mel Orville's gun had cleared and was rising into line, when the slug smashed him low in the body. Doubling in a spasm of bowel-ripped agony Orville's shot tore the ground between them, throwing a shower of dirt across

Hyland's legs and boots. Coming down from the recoil, Hyland fired once more as his barrel came to bear on that shrinking jack-knifed form. Flame leaped with a roar, and dust spurted from the breast of Orville's checkered shirt. The impact lifted him erect and drove him backward, his second aimless shot torcling skyward. Whirling on jacked knees, Mel Orville lunged toward the whitewashed fence in long jerky strides. Plunging blindly against it, Orville clawed in frenzy at the pickets, heaved and fell backward, tearing off two pickets with a splintered crash as he went down.

"Look out, Rife!" screamed Dolly Mayforth.

HYLAND spun swiftly and tried to target his .44, but that squat ape-like man called Hunk Berkoff was already in on top of him with gun barrel clubbed in a crushing stroke. Hyland's skull seemed to explode in a white-hot flash of lightning, and the earth rushed up at him. He felt sparse burnt grass and dirt under his cheek, rocketing pain in his head, and then there was nothing but an unfeeling void of blackness.

"I owed him that for myself," snarled Hunk Berkoff, throwing down on the long loose frame at his feet. "And for Mel, I'm—"

Another voice cut in: "You don't owe him any more, Hunk, and you aren't givin' him any more. Holster that iron and stand back." It was Wyatt Earp striding into the yard, big and easy and powerful, yellow hair glinting under his hat, tawny mustache drooping on the heavy-boned jaws, eyes on fire in his long gaunted face. He hadn't drawn, and he didn't have to draw.

Berkoff sheathed his weapon and backed away, mumbling: "He killed Mel Orville, Wyatt. Shot Mel down like a dog."

"In self-defense and a fair fight," Wyatt Earp said. "And good riddance, too. Orville called him, Hunk; I heard and saw the whole thing, but I couldn't get here in time to stop it." He knelt beside Hyland and examined the bloody blond head. Looking up at Dolly Mayforth, he said: "He's goin' to be all right, miss. I'll get him to a doctor, and I'll have one of the boys take you home."

Dolly nodded, still numbed with shock and horror.

"Wait'll the boss hears about this," Hunk Berkoff muttered; "he'll come in here and clean house on some of them strange punks."

Wyatt Earp rose with a bleak smile. "From what I hear, Hunk, he's already in town. We haven't been able to pick him up yet, but we'll get him before he does any house-cleanin' to speak of, I reckon... Move along now, Hunk, but don't leave town. If this boy shouldn't come to, by any chance, I'll be lookin' for you."

"Who's going to pay for my fence, Wyatt?" called fat Julius Caesar from the entrance of the Maison Doree.

Wyatt Earp smiled with tolerant irony. "The profit on one plate of your quail-on-toast will more than do it, Julius," he said.

IN THAT unlighted room in the Silver City House, Beef Dermid was stretched on his bed, while Jack Vennett sat by a window with the binoculars. "No wonder this drove you to drink, Beef," remarked Vennett. "One night of it's enough to drive me to most anythin'. Don't you ever see any women undressin'?"

"Naw, I never did; nothin' at all to keep a man awake," Dermid said disgustedly.

"Well, I'm goin' to try a nip of this." Vennett took a pint bottle from his pocket, uncorked and sniffed at it, then took a long gurgling drink. Smacking his lips, he replaced the cork and put the whiskey on the table. "Smooth stuff, Beef."

Dermid was pretending not to see

or hear anything, but his nerves and muscles began to twitch as he lay there staring up at the light-and-shadow patterned ceiling. Vennett lit a cigar and puffed contentedly on it. A few minutes later he tipped the bottle up for another swig. Dermid licked his parched lips with a dry tongue, and shifted fretfully on the mattress.

"Don't you want a little touch, Beef?" inquired Vennett.

"Not me, Jack. The minute I take one, Mike Banner'll blow in. You better not hit it too hard, either."

"I can handle it," Vennett said carelessly; "a few drinks never hurt anybody."

When Vennett raised the bottle for the third time, Dermid bounced up with a jangle of bedsprings, and started walking the floor. Vennett said: "What's the matter, Beef? Nervous?"

"Do you have to drink in front of me?" demanded Dermid.

Vennett laughed. "Nothin' worse than a reformed drunk, they say. Have a little shot, Beef, and then you won't mind it. You know damn well Mike won't be comin' back tonight."

"I don't want Rife to know, either."

"Never mind Rife; he's just one of us boys, Beef. And he'd cover you, come hell or high water."

Dermid paced some more, and wheeled abruptly on Vennett. "Gimme that damn bottle, Jack." Lifting it high, he let the fiery liquor pour down his throat and spread its tension-easing warmth inside him. "A-ahh, that *is* good, Jack! I needed that one."

"Sure, you did," Vennett agreed. "Who the hell wouldn't need one on a job like this? Men like us, Beef, fightin' men, we've got to have action, or we've got to have whiskey."

"That's right, Jack." Dermid took another slug, and decided Vennett wasn't such a bad gent after all. Maybe they'd misjudged him. Rife didn't like Jack worth a damn, but even Rife could be wrong once in awhile.

"Help yourself to another, Beef," invited Vennett. "I'm still one up on you."

Dermid grinned and did so. "There! Now we're even, Jack."

When that bottle was empty, Jack Vennett dug another one out of his saddlebags and they went to work on it. By this time Vennett was tongueing the bottle, and Dermid was drinking practically all the whiskey consumed.

Across the street, Alicia Martin's windows went dark, and Vennett stood up. "She's gone out, Beef; get goin' and pick her up, see where she goes."

"Maybe you better go, Jack, and lemme watch here." Dermid's speech was thick and blurred now, his broad face flushed, the eyes fixed and glazed.

"No, you go ahead, Beef," said Vennett. "I can't get anywhere with her, and I'm sick of tryin'."

BEEF DERMID put on his hat and jacket, and lumbered out of the room. Vennett returned to the window. In a few minutes a lamp flickered alight in Alicia's room, moved back and forth, and was extinguished again. Smiling, Jack Vennett buckled on his double-holstered belt, shrugged into a suit-coat, and set his hat at a jaunty angle. He had seen Hunk Berkoff enter Alicia's room, but hadn't mentioned it to Dermid. The gorilla must have brought her the word: *Monk Muncrief was in town, and heading for Room Number 27 in the Cosmopolitan Hotel.*

Alicia said that Muncrief would leave his horse out behind the hotel, and go up the back stairway. He'd have the money on him or with him. If they could catch him out back, it would be perfect. Vennett decided to go find Dermid and wait for Monk at the rear of the building. Beef was necessary to his plan, and he hoped the hulking fool wasn't too drunk. It'd be a hell of a note now, if Beef had wandered off to some saloon. Vennett wouldn't have time to search the barrooms for him; well, if he couldn't lo-

cate Dermid he'd go through with it alone.

Vennett's hand was on the doorknob, when he glanced over his shoulder and saw lamplight blossom in those windows across the narrow side street. A man was moving about in that room, and Vennett knew it was Monk Muncrief before he put the glasses on him. He answered all the descriptions. Medium-sized and quick-moving, with a hawk-nose jutting from a bitter wizened countenance. Dressed in black and wearing two low-slung guns. Vicious-looking about the squinted eyes and downturned mouth. The binoculars even brought out the scar that seamed his bony peaked chin. How could Alicia stand a critter like that all these years?

It was too bad Muncrief had reached the room, but it couldn't be helped. They'd just have to go up and take him there, and try to keep it quiet. Monk had brought some saddlebags with him, and they were undoubtedly bulging with money from that army payroll. Maybe $50,000, a little more or less. A fortune. The key to a new world and a better life. More money than a deputy marshal could earn all the rest of his days.

Vennett left the room and hurried downstairs and out into the maelstrom of the street. Too early for Hyland to be bringing Dolly Mayforth home, he estimated, so they wouldn't have to worry about anyone in Number 25. He found Dermid lounging on the porch rail of the Cosmo in a befuddled daze, and Vennett had never been so glad to see the man.

"Didn't see her," Dermid said. "Couldn't find her, Jack."

"Never mind, Beef. We're goin' up to the room."

"What for? Nobody in it."

"Muncrief's up there, Beef. I saw him with the glasses."

"Where's his woman, Jack?" mumbled Dermid.

"Out somewhere. It don't matter; Muncrief's all we care about." Vennett hustled him in through the extravagant lobby and up the wide ornate staircase.

"Got to take him alive," Dermid said, thick-tongued. "Don't forget, Jack. Get him alive, so we can run down them other three... Wish Rife was here. Feel better with Rife along."

"We don't need Rife. We can take him without Rife, Beef."

"Sure, sure. But I like that long old buggy-whip of a Rife."

"Shut up now, Beef, and walk easy," Vennett ordered, as they neared their objective.

VENNETT tried the door carefully, but it was locked. "Who's there?" Muncrief demanded from within. "Speak up! Who is it?" Then Alicia Martin was with them all of a sudden, speaking through the panels. "It's me, Monk—Alicia. Open up." The key turned, and the woman vanished again across the corridor, as Vennett and Dermid drew their guns. The door opened and Monk Muncrief stared with bitter disgust and helpless rage into the two gun muzzles. Vennett pushed quickly inside, and Dermid blundered after him and shut the door.

"That woman," said Muncrief. "That scurvy rotten no-good yellah-haired gutter wench! I always knew she'd do it sooner or later... Now what the hell do you want? What is this anyway?"

"The law, Monk, the federal law," Vennett said, smiling. "We want you, Monk, and those saddlebags there."

"How do I know you're the law?"

Vennett showed him a gold deputy marshal's badge in a leather folder. "Get his guns, Beef, and go over him for a hideout." Dermid holstered his own Colt, yanked Muncrief's two guns out of the leather, and searched him for other weapons. "Take a look in the saddlebags, Beef," said Vennett.

Dermid unlatched the saddlebags. They were crammed with cash, bills

of all denominations, gold and silver pieces. Dermid shook his heavy brown head in awe. "It's there all right, Jack. Lots of it; looks like all the money in the world."

Monk Muncrief sneered. "It would —to a coupla cheap tinhorn deputies!"

"Shut up, you murderin' scum!" Vennett clipped him across the forehead with the gun barrel. Muncrief staggered, recovered, and stood there suddenly, with the blood trickling down into his venomous slitted eyes and haggard wrinkled face. "Buckle up the bags and keep hold of 'em, Beef," instructed Vennett. "We're takin' Monk for a little walk in the moonlight."

"Where to?" Muncrief asked scornfully. "Some back alley where you can shoot me and hide that money?"

Vennett laid the steel barrel across his skull again, hard enough to bow Muncrief's balding head and bend his knees. He stiffened upright and defiant once more, his seamed shrunken face threaded all over with glistening scarlet.

"I'd like to shoot you, but you're goin' to jail," Vennett said; "and you're goin' to tell us who the other three killers are."

"That's what you think, deputy."

"You'll talk," Vennett told him. "You think you won't maybe, but you'll sing real pretty for us. Or maybe you'd rather talk here, Monk; if you do, we'll give you a chance to run for it."

"So you can plug me in the back?" jeered Muncrief.

"Who was with you, Monk? I could beat it out of you with this gun barrel."

Muncrief grimaced and wiped blood from his eyes. "I'll tell you one of them: Mel Orville. But he's dead now." The outlaw laughed through a cirmson mask.

"Dead? It must have been awful sudden."

"It was. A long towheaded stringbean of a kid shot him in front of the Maison Doree tonight. Don't you know anythin' that's goin' on in town? Or does Alicia keep you too busy?"

"So Rife got Orville," mused Vennett, and then his tone hardened. "Come on, killer; let's get movin'!" He prodded Muncrief out into the hallway, and Dermid followed with the moneybags.

The door to Number 25 opened and Dolly Mayforth's dark head appeared, her fine clear face blanching at the sight of Muncrief's bloodied features and the gun in Vennett's hand. "Oh, I didn't know..." She slammed the door shut, and the key grated in the lock.

"Back stairs," Jack Vennett said, thinking with cold anger: *Now don't that beat hell? She got a good look at all of us, and she'll know... Well, it's a tough break, especially on her; she'll have to be taken care of, that's all. You'd think that damn Hyland would've kept her out longer than this. But maybe that gunfight broke it up. What a time to pop her head out of that door. It could ruin everything, unless her tongue is stopped.*

THEY DESCENDED the back way and emerged in the rear area, deep-shadowed and quiet. There was Muncrief's horse, standing hipshot and head down, cropping at the scant sundried grass in the darkness. "Leave the bags and go get our horses, Beef," said Vennett. "Make it fast, too."

"We don't need horses to get to the jailhouse," protested Dermid.

Muncrief laughed. "We ain't goin' to jail, friend; we're goin' out in the hills to dump my body down a mine shaft. You're pretty dumb, even for a deputy."

Dermid stumbled in between the other two, back to Vennett and staring questioningly at Muncrief. "You really figure that way, Monk?"

"On your way, Beef," commanded Vennett. "Do what I say, boy."

Beef Dermid started to turn in slow baffled protest. Vennett cried, "Watch

out, Beef!" and struck him with a hooking left hand behind the ear, driving Dermid aside and down. One of the outlaw's guns slithered loose from Dermid's belt, and Vennett kicked it toward Muncrief's boots. Monk looked from the pistol to Vennett. "All right, deputy," he said. "I hope it does you a lot of good." And he stooped to reach for the gun on the ground.

Jack Vennett waited until Muncrief's fingers closed on the grip. Then he lunged forward and jammed his muzzle against Monk's body and pulled the trigger. The report was muffled, the flame flattened out into a scorching pancake of orange light, and the concussion hurled Monk Muncrief backward onto his shoulders, his legs thrashing, slowing, slumping into dead slackness in the dirt. The gun was still in the outlaw's hand.

Beef Dermid got up slowly, rubbing his neck, blinking at Muncrief's body and then at Vennett. "What'd you do that for, Jack?"

"It was you or him, Beef," said Vennett. "He grabbed a gun out of your belt—see it in his hand? He was goin' to give it to you when I hit you, knocked you out of line. He tried to switch it onto me then, but I beat him to it."

Dermid gazed down at the gun in Muncrief's lifeless hand. "Yeah, I see, Jack. Reckon I got to thank you; but I don't like this."

"*You* don't like it!" Vennett said, with heat. "It wouldn't have happened if you hadn't staggered in there between us."

"Yeah, I guess you're right, Jack. Well, we better take him in."

"We can't take him in, you damn fool! That girl upstairs saw us. He was our prisoner, bleedin' and unarmed: and we were supposed to get him alive, no matter what. Mike Banner would lift our badges, and maybe charge us with murder. Or manslaughter, at least."

"What we goin' to do then, Jack?" asked Dermid, confused and hopeless, his head throbbing from that blow and the alcohol fumes.

"Have to do like he said, Beef. Take him out and dump him in some old mine shaft, I reckon. What else can we do?"

"I don't know, Jack. My head hurts, I can't think straight."

"You swilled too much whiskey," Vennett said. "Let me do the thinkin', Beef."

Dermid groaned. "And the money. What we goin' to do with all that money? We'll turn that in, won't we, Jack? Got to turn that in."

"Sure, Beef," said Vennett. "But first we'll have to rig up a story about how we got hold of it. For the time bein' we'll have to hide the damn stuff."

"What a mess!" moaned Dermid. "What a filthy stinkin' mess."

"Buck up, boy," Jack Vennett said. "We're in it together, and we'll get out of it together—some way. Now let's wash the blood off Monk's face and tie him in the saddle. Get him out the back streets into the nearest hills. I'll fix him up, Beef, while you go after our horses. If anybody spots us, he's dead drunk, see?... We can get away with it all right, Beef. Go around back to the O.K. Corral, and don't stop to talk to a damn soul."

Dermid started away, checked himself unsteadily, and wheeled ponderously around. "Just happened to think, Jack. How come Alicia Martin sided us against her man?"

"How the hell do I know? Probably she's sick of her man."

Dermid peered at him. "You had it all framed and set up, didn't you, Jack? You and Alicia."

"You're still drunk," Vennett said, in disgust. "Get those crazy notions out of your thick head, Beef, and go get the horses. You know nobody ever believes a drunk."

- 5 -

WHEN THEY rode back in from the hills it was three o'clock in the morning. Although the hilarity had subsided somewhat, Tombstone was still roaring and ablaze with lights, and the mad carnival would go on until the morning sun rose red above the Granadas. Then new shifts of bartenders, dealers, entertainers, and revelers would take over.

"I'll put up the horses," Vennett said. "You need some sleep, Beef."

"Hope Rife ain't home yet," Dermid muttered, dismounted with stiff weariness and handing his reins to Vennett.

"You know what to tell him if he is," Vennett said. "Stick to that story and we're all right, Beef. You bust down, and we're liable to wind up with a rope on our necks or iron bars all around us." He jogged on toward the O.K. Corral, and Dermid dragged himself into the Silver City House with reluctant dread and dire forebodings. The liquor had worn off, and Dermid was sick, mentally as well as physically. Drink had always been his one glaring weakness, and sometime it would wreck him beyond repair. Maybe it had tonight.

Rife Hyland was sitting in a chair by the window, with a bandage on his fair cropped head and a pipe in his firm white teeth. He regarded Dermid with cold eyes and a deadpan expression. "You sure follow orders good. This place smelled like a whiskey still when I came in. Who had the liquor, Beef?"

"Me and Jack."

"Who brought it up here?"

"Well, Jack did. But he didn't twist my arm or anythin', Rife."

Hyland nodded somberly. "I thought so. Where you been this time?"

"After Monk Muncrief. Saw him in the room over there, and took after him, but he got away."

"Funny he'd get away, when Alicia was workin' with Vennett. You know about that, I reckon?"

"No. I don't know nothin' about Vennett and his women, Rife."

Hyland eyed him steadily. "You're a damn poor liar, Beef. You never could lie worth a hoot. Vennett has been with Alicia all the time, but he kept it secret. He's plannin' on pullin' some kind of a doublecross—if he hasn't done it already. I suppose he got you drunk and hauled you in on the deal. Fifty thousand is a lot of money—even split two or three ways."

Dermid sank down on the side of a bed, with a helpless open-palmed gesture of despair. "Yeah, I got drunk again, Rife. You can have my badge; I'm resignin'."

"It's not quite that easy, Beef," said Hyland gravely. "You better tell me the truth about what happened. Maybe we can still salvage somethin' out of this mucked-up mess."

"I got nothin' to tell, Rife. Honest, I ain't."

"You can't lie, Beef, especially to me. I'd hate to take a gun to you, Beef, but I sure will, unless you start talkin' straight. It'd be easier to tell me than to spill it to Mike Banner, wouldn't it? Let's have it, Beef. I know you're in bad trouble. I can't help you, if you won't talk."

"I told you, Rife, he got clean away; we chased him into the hills and lost him."

"You're still lyin', Beef," said Rife Hyland. "You want to know what I think happened? I think you killed Muncrief and took the money and got rid of his body."

Beef Dermid jerked upright off the bed. "I didn't kill him, Rife. We got tangled up and Monk was goin' to burn me down, but Jack beat him to

it. Jack killed him to save me, Rife; we never intended to kill him."

"*You* didn't, Beef, but Vennett's been countin' on that right along. He fed you whiskey and dragged you into it to cover himself." Rife Hyland stood up, lank and towering in the room, and shucked his gunbelt and holster into place. "Where's Vennett? Did he run out?"

"No, he just took the horses to the corral."

"Anybody see you—besides Alicia Martin?"

"No," Dermid mumbled, and then his reddened eyes widened and his mouth gaped in horror. "Yes, Rife, yes! I almost forgot. That gal of yours, that Mayforth gal. She saw us leave the room with Monk!"

"Come on, Beef," said Hyland, cramming a hat onto his high bandaged blond head. "We've got to hurry, boy; Vennett'll be goin' for Dolly Mayforth now."

"He—he wouldn't do that, Rife."

"The hell he wouldn't!" Rife Hyland said. "For fifty thousand he'd strangle his own mother. I always knew he had a rotten streak in him; it's croppin' out for fair tonight."

THERE WAS less traffic and fewer people in the street, but the all-night pleasure palaces were still gaudy, flamboyant and booming. As they hurried along the plank walk, Dermid said: "That Orville you got, Rife; he was one of the payroll robbers."

"Yeah, I know," Hyland said. "He had close to fifteen thousand in his moneybelt. Hunk Berkoff was in on it too, I reckon. And Wyatt Earp figures the fourth man's a little weasel-snouted coyote named Kip Kastan, who must've been hidin' out with Muncrief."

"Well, two of 'em are dead anyway," Dermid said, feeling sober and clear-headed again, deriving confidence and cheer from Hyland's presence. "If we get 'em all, Rife, Mike can't be too riled at us."

"We'll get 'em, Beef," drawled Rife Hyland. "But the worst one of the bunch is packin' a deputy marshal's badge and aimin' to kill one of the sweetest girls in the world."

Dermid glanced up at Hyland's keen profile. "You really got it bad, Rife?"

"She's the kind of a girl I always wanted to meet, Beef," said Hyland. "I figure we could get along fine in the double-harness."

Dermid shook his shaggy head. "I hate to see it happen, Rife. You're too damn young to sell out your life to a woman."

Hyland laughed. "Too early to worry much about it, Beef; I was just doin' some wide-awake dreamin'."

They were in front of the Cosmopolitan, and Hyland's boot was on the first step, when Dermid's warning cry brought him swiveling about with smooth lithe swiftness. Hyland had been intent on protecting Dolly Mayforth up there on the second floor, and it was Dermid who sighted the danger coming. The gorilla-like Hunk Berkoff and the small evil warped figure of another man were slanting across the flare-lighted shadow-flickering street. That would be Kip Kastan, the fourth man.

They spread out and went for their guns in mid-street, but Beef Dermid had already wheeled into his draw, very fast for a bulky man, and his shots were beating and flaming across the thoroughfare with a sudden shattering roar. Hunk Berkoff, hit hard and knocked backward on jittering bowlegs, got his gun up but too high, the bullet splintering the veranda rail and crashing through a hotel window. Beef Dermid slammed home another slug and Hunk Berkoff was down in the gravel, rolling, clawing, and threshing up dust in the amber lamplight, succumbing at last into sprawling ape-like stillness.

Waspish Kip Kastan had the jump

on Hyland, but Rife's fluid flashing speed overcame that advantage and matched the bandit's draw. Their guns blared almost simultaneously, but Hyland's slug struck solidly and in time to tilt Kastan's barrel slightly upward. The shot tore Hyland's new suitcoat at the left shoulder, searing the flesh and eating wood from the porch steps.

Rife Hyland leveled off his up-kicking Colt and lined another .44 at the reeling spraddle-kneed Kastan, who spun toplike from the walloping impact. Narrow hunched back toward Hyland, Kip Kastan jogged erractically toward the opposite arcade on legs of splayed jerking rubber. Firing into the ground, Kastan tripped and toppled face forward into the dirt geysering up from his bullet, never stirring once he was stretched on the earth.

WYATT EARP and Doc Holliday appeared across the street, and Rife Hyland called: "There's two more of 'em, Wyatt. Send somebody to cover the back of the Cosmo. We've got one more to flush out!" With that, Hyland went leaping up the steps and into the lobby, Beef Dermid laboring and panting at his heels. Fighting their way through an excited crowd, they reached and climbed the ornate stairway.

Midway along the dimmed-out stretch of the corridor, Jack Vennett was crouching at the door of Room Number 25, and beyond him Alicia Martin was lying in a silken huddle, her golden hair spread awry and shimmering on the maroon carpet.

Vennett whirled toward them, still crouched and snarling with rage and hatred as he recognized the tall slender Hyland and the wide burly Dermid, his right hand whipping to his holster. But Rife Hyland, striding on at him, already had his gun lined, blazing and bucking up in his big hand, the reports thunderous in the confines of that long hallway.

Muzzle-light lanced at Hyland, as Vennett fired and slumped twisting back on the wall, gutshot and dying but still striving to control his gun-hand for another shot. Vennett's second bullet ripped the red carpet, and his third raked showers of plaster from the ceiling over the heads of Hyland and Dermid.

Rife Hyland was ready to throw down with a final shot, when Vennett suddenly collapsed in a headlong plunge across the corridor. Writhing over onto his back, he dropped the gun and clutched convulsively at his slashed bleeding abdomen with crimsoned hands, groaning and rolling his handsome dark head in unbearable torment. Hyland and Dermid walked up and stood over him, their faces strained and solemn, smirched with gunpowder and glistening with sweat.

"Too bad, Jack," said Hyland; "but you sure asked for it."

Vennett stopped moaning and tried to grin at them. It was a pitiful grimace. His eyes flickered to Dermid. "You—crossed me—Beef."

"I had to, Jack," said Dermid; "you was crossin' everybody else."

"It's all right," Vennett panted. "It was—worth tryin'—anyway. Glad you —got me—Rife. Before I—got to—that girl."

"I'm givin' you a clean bill, Jack," said Hyland. "Nobody's goin' to know about this, boy."

"Don't matter—much now," gasped Vennett. "But Mike—will feel better —about it." A groan broke through his clenched teeth. Jack Vennett turned his face away from them, shuddered violently, and was stark and silent on the floor, vacant eyes staring sightlessly at Alicia Martin's blonde tresses.

They carried Alicia into her room and laid her on the bed, where she soon regained consciousness. "Tried to stop him," she whimpered. "Would've killed him myself—if I'd had a gun."

"You'll be all right," Hyland told her. "It's all over now."

On the way out of the room he met Dolly Mayforth in the doorway, her dark eyes haunted, her features drawn and pale. Hyland held her close for a moment. "Nothin' more to worry about, Dolly. No more mystery, no more fightin'. You stay with Alicia now. I'll be back, as soon as I can." He bent and kissed her gently, and her lips responded instantly.

"Everything's all right, Rife," murmured Dolly Mayforth, "as long as you come back to me."

"I'll come, Dolly," said Hyland, and stepped out into the corridor with Dermid at his shoulder.

"I know where that money's hid," Dermid said, "and I know where to find Muncrief's body."

"Good," Rife Hyland said. "It's all wrapped up, Beef."

Wyatt Earp was waiting in the lobby with his brothers and Doc Holliday, Sheriff Behan and young Breakenridge. "Did you get the other one, Rife?" iniquired Wyatt Earp, fingering his tawny mustache.

"No, Wyatt; he killed one of my men and got away," Hyland said. "But he wasn't one of the important ones. The four big ones are all dead."

"Muncrief's dead, too?"

"That's right, Wyatt. Muncrief and Orville, Berkoff and Kastan."

"They're the boys," Earp agreed. "Berkoff and Kastan had about ten thousand apiece on them. Muncrief must've had most of it... And you say one of your men went under, Rife?"

Rife Hyland inclined his high blond head. "Jack Vennett, Wyatt. Killed in the line of duty."

Wyatt Earp nodded solemnly, a knowing look in his deep blue-gray eyes, an understanding smile under the drooping mustache. "If you say so, Rife," he drawled, "why, that's the way it is, son."

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VIGILANTE JUSTICE

by White Eagle

QUICK AND sure justice was meted out in the old days by the Vigilante Committee around Virginia City, and for that matter throughout the entire mining region. During the gold days, the territory became flooded with an immigration of ruffians, notorious desperados and cutthroats—the refuse of the Pacific States and territories.

Encouraged by impunity, their leaders sought and obtained such positions in the lower executive ranks of government, so that justice against any member or members of the band having its ramification throughout the entire mining regions was practically impossible. The people, enduring until longer endurance ceased to be a virtue, were compelled to form a Vigilante Committee.

The leader of one of these gangs was a man by the name of Plummer, who had gotten himself elected Sheriff. In this office he was in a position to protect his gang of killers, and he got away with it for quite some time, until people began to suspect that he was the real leader of the gang; hence the formation of the Vigilantes.

During the years of 1862 and 1863, the members of Plummer's gang were busy holding up stages, and killing and robbing miners; this continued until finally the vigilantes figured it was time to take action. They proceeded at once by surrounding the camp of Virginia City, and rounded up all of the known

Plummer's gang, including Plummer himself. Only one had managed to escape— Bill Hunter had gotten wind of the roundup to come, and had managed to get away—for the time being, at least.

All of those caught were known to be guilty of both murder and robbery; all were hanged without further ado on the nearest trees. Plummer himself was hanged higher than any of them; as the leader of the gang. he was entitled to this distinction. But there was still Bill Hunter.

Bill Hunter was the last of Plummer's gang to be executed. His troubles started and ended in the fall of that same year 1863. A miner by the name of Emery had left camp and gone to the Gallatin valley for the winter, when Hunter drifted in on foot with both feet frozen. After eluding the .Vigilante guards. which had been placed around the mining camp, he had walked through snow and cold to the Gallatin.

It was about the time of the Barney Hughes stampede for reported rich gold diggings. Emery, with several companions, had been out searching for Hughes' trail, aiming to follow it to the fabulously rich gulch he was supposed to have discovered. Failing to find his trail, they gave up the search and returned to their cabin during a snowstorm. When they reached the cabin there was a man inside; they soon learned who he was, and knew he was one of the men wanted by the Vigilantes.

The stranger was Bill Hunter; he knew that he had been recognized, but talked freely, and without reserve. At no time did he acknowledge his guilt; he talked to both Emery and Kelley —Emery's partner—as if he was an old friend of theirs, and asked Kelley to get him a horse from Gallatin as he was aiming to head for new territory. During that day and the next he told the two miners how he had escaped from Virginia City.

Through some of his friends he had found out that the Vigilantes had organized, and were determined to rid the country of the gang. That they had a list of all of the Plummer members was a foregone conclusion. From the fact that Hunter was not as well known as the rest, he had kept himself concealed until after dark in an open drain ditch. That night he had started across the divide into Madison valley, but the snow and severe cold weather had frosted both of his feet quite severely—so much so, that it became difficult for him to travel at all. He had managed to get food from a few settlers, and hunters' camps.

During the third night after Hunter's arrival at the cabin, and about midnight, men surrounded the cabin. Emery was awakened by the tramp of horses; thinking that it might be their own animals which had returned to the cabin. he got up.

Going outside, he found that there were 13 mounted men. They dismounted and came inside and stayed until morning. All during the night Hunter pretended to be asleep; at daylight the visitors prepared to leave, and went outside to talk. After having discussed the situation among themselves, they knew they had the man they wanted and entered the cabin again. Ranging themselves around the bed on which Hunter lay, the leader went to the side of the bed and laid one of his arms across Hunter. At the same time, he pulled the cover off Hunter's face and said, "Hello, Bill. I want to talk to you."

"If you want to take me back to Virginia City, and give me a fair trial I will go with you; but if not, I won't go," Hunter replied.

"You shall have a trial," was the answer. "We want you to get up and come with us. Have you got a gun in bed with you?"

"Yes."

"Give it to me," the leader demanded. When the gun was handed over,

Hunter was ordered to get up and dress, which he did—protesting all the time his innocence of complicity in the activities of those who had been hanged when he had escaped from Virginia City.

When Hunter was told to come on, he asked for a horse; when the vigilantes left, Hunter was mounted. The trail they took led into an opening where directly in front and to the left was open prairie, to the right was a creek, near which stood a cottonwood tree. Here the party halted, and in spite of Hunter's protest he was hanged. The next day Hunter's body was found with a note pinned to his clothing with these words: *Bill Hunter, executed to satisfy the strict requirements of justice.*

Many such hangings were performed throughout the west, around Bannack, and as far as the Musselshell and Lodge Pole creek. At the latter place, a gang of rustlers had stolen a herd of horses from a caravan of emigrants, leaving them without the means to travel. Horses in those days were valuable; without them you just didn't travel—leastways, not unless you had good legs. When the theft of the emigrants' horses was reported, the vigilantes took up the trail of the rustlers. The trail led them up near the Missouri river, where the rustlers were caught napping in their camp; they, with the horses, were taken in hand and brought back. When the horses were identified by the emigrants, short work was made of the rustlers; they were strung up on trees along the Musselshell river, and here they hung dangling in the wind for a mighty long time.

Some eight years later, while riding along the river, I saw their bones lying on the ground. The ropes which had taken their lives were still dangling in the breeze from the limbs above. Yes, the Vigilantes were swift with justice.

★

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"Take my advice, lad, and kill Ab Larson the next time. There'll be a next time, too, or I don't know him!"

TAOS MAN

Novelet of Dangerous Trails

by Lauran Paine

DOWN OFF the ledge of rusty, red rocks he came, leaning back a little in the saddle, his smoky grey eyes on the steep trail and his generous, full mouth pulled back a little against his teeth. The bay horse was head down, snorting softly as though he, too, was uneasy over the treacherous, serrated bony ribs that led down into the Santa Ynez valley below.

Coke Bright was his name. It was a name that hadn't been heard in the Santa Ynez valley for close to seven years. There were still some Brights in the valley, though; one family of them. Coke's uncle, aunt and cousin

Jack. They were all that was left of the old stock that had come in with a long rifle and powerful back below narrowed, hard eyes, back in the early days. Time and the tide of progress had weakened the strain, robbed it of the durability and blind courage that had driven it there in the first place.

Now Coke Bright was back and somewhere, dimly, in the back of people's minds, the name was musically familiar. Still, memory failing, they shrugged. Another drifter; one more hungry rider passing through Santa Ynez, staying long enough to cadge a few drinks, some meals, a little cowpunching and a few silver dollars; then he'd drift on, too, like all of the breed —always broke, restless, quiet and efficient. All members of a peculiar, wandering tribe of men who were constantly riding on, out of the valley and into the setting sun of their destinies, never returning.

Coke put up his horse at Martin's Livery Barn. He stood aimlessly outside in the early dusk of the warm summer night and listened to the noises coming from the emigrant camp next to the livery stable. In the shadows were some huge, gaunt outlines of Conestogas. There was a smell of frying meat, sort of greasily appetizing. Nostalgia swept over the lean rider and he half-hesitatingly turned toward the drab, colorless emigrants. At their fires he would find hospitality and could lose himself in the monotony of their dull conversations. Anyway, he wouldn't be lonely.

He walked among the people with their rough, homespun clothing and thick, heavy, clod-hopper boots. The women were tanned with the scars of the land they had crossed, an immense, primitive land of friendliness and harshness. Kids played at playing, but their big, puzzled eyes watched the elders surreptitiously, showing the doubt and wonder that went on inside their heads. Coke bumped into a big, rheumy eyed man with a rich chestnut beard. He'd been watching a girl step down from one of the high wagons.

He stepped back quickly and smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, pardner; 'wasn't watchin' where I was goin'."

For just a second a fire of irritation burned high on each of the big man's cheeks beneath his baleful eyes, then it vanished. He looked at Coke's heavily silvered spurs, his sagging, worn and ominous .45, at his careless, half Mexican, half Indian, clothing of loose fitting, fringed buckskin shirt worn outside a heavy pair of California pants. His eyes swept back upwards to the cowboy's face. "You a native hereabouts?"

"No. Just a traveler."

It didn't satisfy the big man. Coke was obviously what he meant, whether he could put it into words or not. He frowned and shook his head. "What I mean is, you're a Westerner, ain't ya?"

Coke nodded slightly. There was a slow crescendo of loping horses, en masse, borne on the warm evening air and the sound of men calling to one another. Coke heard the words plainly as the riders thundered past the livery barn. "I know damned well he come thisaway. Hell, we follered his sign plumb over the summit an' even found where he slithered down them danged red cliffs. Gawd, a man's gotta be desperate as hell to cross over up there." There was a snatch of an answer and the dusty, sweaty possemen swept past. "Yeah. You'd damned well be desperate too if you'd—" They were gone and the ribbon of their hoarse voices was muffled by the other noises of the town.

Coke hadn't been listening to the big emigrant and he knew from the man's face that he'd been asked a question. "How was that, stranger? All them horses a-goin' by drowned you out."

"I said come over to my wagon an' we'll eat; I wantta ast some questions about the country ahead."

Coke sighed slightly and nodded. "I'll foller ya."

THE BIG man's name was Hause, Karl Hause. He was from Indiana. He had a good wagon and plenty of animals to pull it, plus several head of critters that were herded with the communal flock. His wife was a raspy-voiced woman with a tremendous bosom and a jutting, indomitable jaw. She tossed a long, wavy lock of greying, black hair out of her face as she poked at the smoking little cooking fire. She nodded brusquely when her husband introduced Coke. "Set."

Coke sat, cross legged, and eased his gun thoughtfully around in front where it lay against his belt buckle. The movement was unconscious and went unnoticed by all the family. All of them, that is, except the girl who had just come around the end of the huge Conestoga wagon, a wooden water bucket on her arm. She had seen Coke unconsciously place his gun where it was instantly available and stopped in her tracks. Fidelity Hause had the rich, golden coloring of youth with a sun tan. Her figure was clean-limbed, full and firm; the violet blue eyes that were pinned on the buckskin-shirted stranger at the cooking fire were deep set, wide and altogether beautiful. She tossed her taffy hair and went up to the fire where her Mother pointed out a spot near the cooking fire, for the water bucket.

Coke moved a little, so the powerful reek of Hause's charred, stubby pipe wouldn't get in his eyes. He didn't smoke and couldn't understand how anyone else could—especially when the thing smelled as foul as Hause's pipe. He watched the emigrant's eyes and saw no sign of undue moisture. He was lost in a maze of fascination at watching the heavy, greyish clouds of smoke roll freely from the man's mouth and nose as he talked.

"We come on from Taos. You know where that is?"

"I reckon; I was born there."

Hause's ugly, rheumy, mud colored eyes widened a little. "That so? Well now, I hear men from Taos are ring-tailed hellers. They's a feller named Carson lives over there. Some sort of scout or somethin'. He told me—"

Coke was smiling. He knew Kit Carson's uncontrollable love of scaring the daylights out of emigrants. "Carson was more'n likely spoofin' ya; he gets a big kick out of that."

"That so? Well, in that case it's a laugh on me." He removed the vile pipe from his mouth and spat a resounding stream against a massive, iron tired wagon wheel. "Now then, young man, tell me; how far's it from this here Santa Ynez to the next water?"

"About forty miles; if you're headin' West on the Oregon Trail, your next campsite'll be Chacon Springs." He smoothed off the churned up ground with the palm of his hand and laboriously drew a crude map of the country ahead. Karl Hause was bent over, absorbed in the sketch when some sixth sense made Coke raise his head quickly. Hause's daughter had come up and was looking at the dust drawing.

Karl Hause looked up quickly, annoyed at the interruption. He saw the stranger looking at his daughter and reluctantly took the pipe out of his mouth. "This here is my daughter. Fidelity, this here is—is—"

Coke Bright, ma'm." Coke was on his feet and conscious of the grease stains on his clothing and the dust on his boots. He smiled and removed his flat brimmed hat. Fidelity saw that his hair was a sort of brownish blond color. She nodded slightly, unsmilingly; she remembered the gun and looked pointedly at it. Coke reddened. He knew what she meant; he had heard it before from emigrants. Native westerners were inherent killers. They were crude, reckless and unscrupulous, like the land they lived in. She felt his hungry eyes on her and started to turn away.

Coke broke the awkward silence. "It's a big country, ma'am; it don't pay to go around unprepared." She knew what he meant and her eyes flick-

ered over the sagging gun in its shiny holster for the quickest part of a second before she answered.

"Yes. I can see that; also I understand that guns are awfully handy for robbing stages and travelers too."

Coke was stunned, and watched her walk back by the cooking fire with a startled look on his face. Robbing stages and travelers. There was some kind of an inner warning ringing somewhere in the back of his mind. He was still standing erect when he became aware of Karl Hause's voice lifted in a garrulous, plaintive sort of appeal.

"Set down, Bright. Women're always bein' nasty 'bout somethin' or th' other. Now then, if we take this here trail to Chacon Springs, startin' at sunup, you reckon we'd git there by aft' noon, allowin' fer no breakdowns?"

"Don't see why not." Coke's frowning features were on the dust sketch, but in his mind's eye was a thoroughly wonderful, tall lithesome figure of a woman walking away from him, toward the cooking fire. He made a sudden decision and looked up at Karl Hause, who was methodically knocking out his pipe dottle against a small rock. "I'll tell you what; I'll ride with you as far as the Springs an' show you the trail from there to Buckthorn, the next town, which isn't a town at all. It's a tradin' post for the Navajos and southern Apaches."

Hause accepted the big tin plate from his sturdy, tight lipped wife without looking up. He was plainly embarrassed. "Now then, look here. Hell man, you don't have to go to all that there bother. We'll—" Mrs. Hause cut him off by shoving another steaming plate past him so that he had to lean back, toward Coke Bright.

"Thanks, ma'm."

Mrs. Hause was turning away when the frontiersman spoke. She hesitated, surprised, then threw him a quick, suspicious but not ungrateful nod. Being thanked for anything, since leaving Indiana, was an unheard-of, unsuspected luxury.

Coke turned back to Hause. "I'll go over to the livery barn an' fetch my sleepin' gear an' camp outside your wagon." He ate in silence and the hot, thick beef gravy was foreign to his digestive tract, which had become accustomed to wolfing down cold venison and tacos or 'piki' fixed over a bed of hot stones with, if his luck was good, a baked prairie chicken.

- 2 -

SANTA YNEZ traded one kind of noise for another as darkness set in. The feverish, anxious commerce of the daytime gave way with the passing of the sunlight, to a more raucous, lingering sort of bedlam. The saloons were running full tilt and the banging of off-tune musical instruments was audible over the squeals of painted ladies and rough cowmen mixed in with a sprinkling of the younger emigrants.

Coke was half asleep in the watery moonlight, the scented night air washing over him like a benediction, when a heavily shod boot came abruptly up against his ribs. He grunted and his eyes flipped open. "Easy there, pardner; this ain't no rag pile, it's a man sleepin'."

For a moment there was no answer and Coke looked up at the hulk of young emigrant who towered over him. He expected to hear a mumbled apology and was mildly surprised when the stranger stooped down roughly, seized the foot of his blankets and straightened up with a quick, savage jerk. Coke spilled out onto the ground, rolled once and was on his stockinged feet. There was just a second's hesitation, while the

arrogant face before him was wreathed in a sardonic smile.

Coke Bright wasn't a tall man, nor was he especially heavily set; but he had that lithe, supple force that far outweighed either sturdiness or bulk. He minced up close and his balled up fists, white and blurred in the faint half light of the summer night, struck out venemously. The big man swore thickly, spat and waded in. Coke sidestepped the rush, caught a brief smell of liquor and horse sweat, and fired his right fist with his shoulder down behind it. The blow caught the big emigrant flat footed. It sounded like the crack of a drover's whip when it connected, just aft of the stranger's ear. The emigrant sagged, took two weak steps and went down across Coke's bedding like a pole-axed steer.

Coke didn't hear anyone coming up until he heard a bull bass behind him. He spun, crouched. Karl Hause came up carrying a swinging lantern that threw off a wavering, yellowish light. "What's going on out here?"

Coke shrugged. "Damned if I know; some clod-hopper dumped me out of my blankets." He jutted his chin Indian fashion, toward the relaxed man on the ground. "That's the varmint over there."

Hause went over, knelt down and rolled the man. He grunted in surprise. "Hell, you've gone an' knocked Abner Larson plumb cold." There was disbelief in Hause's voice. "What'd you use? A club?" His eyes ran quickly over the silhouette of Coke's lean figure as the frontiersman opened his mouth to answer.

Another voice broke in. A soft, bitter voice with a heavy tinge of sarcasm in it. "No; mister Bright wouldn't use a club, Father; he'd use his gun."

Coke didn't have to look behind him to know who said it, but he looked anyway. Fidelity Hause, her mass of taffy hair a faint, golden halo in the weak moonlight, stood with bitter eyes watching her father bringing Abner Larson around. She ignored Coke.

"Who's this here Larson, anyway?"

Fidelity Hause's big, violet eyes swept up to him with a flash of scorn. "He's an honest man—an emigrant, mister Bright. He's what you westerners call a clod-hopper; he's my fiancee."

COKE GROANED inwardly and looked back at Larson, who was sitting weakly where he had fallen, rubbing an exploratory hand gingerly over the back of his head. He studied the big man's face and wondered what a handsome girl like Fidelity could see in the massive, coarse, harsh features of Larson.

Karl Hause got stiffly to his feet, picked up the lantern and stood in indecision for a moment before he spoke. "We got to be out o' here with the first light o' day. Let's all get to bed."

It made sense, but wasn't particularly appropriate. Larson got slowly to his feet and pointed thick fingers at Coke. "Who in hell's that?"

Before Hause could answer, Coke took a quick step forward. "Watch your talk, clod-hopper; there's a lady standin' here."

Ab Larson made a rumbling sound deep in his chest and leaned a little forward. Karl Hause stepped between the two men. "Now then, cut that out. Fidelity, you get back in the wagon." The swish of her clothing told Coke that the girl was obeying her father. He didn't dare take his eyes off the menacing emigrant, but he could picture the scornful glare the girl tossed at him as she left, and he writhed inwardly.

Karl Hause turned back to the two men and his face was wreathed in a dark frown that made his mud-colored eyes appear malevolent. "Look-a-here, you two, this thing was a mistake. Ab, you hadn't ought to fall over a man, then get hard about it." Larson didn't

answer but his glowering look was sufficient.

Hause faced Coke. "Bright, you're too quick with your hands. We don't want no trouble," he spat exasperatedly. "There's more than enough grief as it is," he cleared his throat self consciously and walked toward the wagon. "Now then, boys, let's get some sleep."

Larson glared at Coke for a full five seconds, then spat in contempt, turned abruptly and stalked off into the darkness. Coke lay awake for a long time, just in case Larson should come back; when he finally fell asleep, he imagined he could hear the swish of Fidelity's dress as she climbed back into the wagon.

There were six wagons in the emigrant train. They squeaked and groaned and tilted over the rough ruts of the prairie as they ambled ponderously out of Santa Ynez valley. Coke was riding beside Karl Hause. Neither man said anything; their eyes were fixed on the twin ribbons, faint but unmistakable, that stretched like long, erratic snakes across the bosom of the raw land. Twin streaks that heralded the tide of empire. They spanned a huge, somnolent continent, and the massive, grinding wheels that rolled over them, crushed out the life of the tiny, frail wild flowers that dared to bloom in the highway of progress. The morning was soft and gentle with a clear, azure sky and the faint, elusive scent of sage and sunshine spread like a blanket over the still cool prairie.

"Sure would be a good farmin' country."

Coke looked around himself in critical appraisal. He knew this land like the back of his hand, but he'd never thought of it as particularly good farm land. He shrugged. "Mebbe. If you could get shed of the In'yuns an' get some water, then maybe a man could farm it."

Hause lit his pipe and the usually offensive odor didn't seem so objectionable when it was mixed with the fragrance of the sage. "The In'yuns won't give us trouble much longer; it's on'y a question of time, with them." He lowered his head briefly and spat. "But the water's somethin' else again."

COKE WOULD have argued the Indian theory if he hadn't heard a horse loping up behind them. He turned slightly and saw Abner Larson riding in beside him. Karl Hause smiled affably at the young emigrant, and Larson carefully ignored Coke.

"The boys just come in from out front, Karl; they say there's a whale of a big bunch of Injuns camped on the prairie out there."

"On our trail?"

"Yep."

Hause turned to Coke. "What you make of it?"

Coke shrugged indifferently. "Probably a migratin' band, headin' for their summer huntin' grounds."

Larson's domineering features were gravely watching Coke. "Yeah; or maybe they're out after emigrant livestock."

"I don't allow so; In'yns, out here, don't jump emigrant trains so close to towns. Hell, you're not more'n twenty-five miles or so from Santa Ynez."

Larson was smiling unpleasantly. "Well, I allow you ought'ta know, livin' like an Injin most o' your life."

Coke tossed a wry smile at Larson and gave him stare for stare. "I reckon you're right, at that; anyway, those of us who've lived out here know enough to stay in our own country."

Larson flushed a deep red. "You lookin' fer trouble?"

Coke shrugged again. "If you aren't all mouth, clod-hopper, go for your gun."

The words were softly and quickly spoken; Karl Hause didn't have a chance to interfere. Larson snarled an oath and made a surprisingly smooth and experienced grab for his .44. He was fast, but not quite fast enough.

Coke Bright's hand was jumping and bucking under the recoil of his own Peacemaker. Larson dropped his gun as his horse shied violently. He looked surprised for a fleeting second, then he slid off his mount and tumbled like a sack of wet meal, to the prairie.

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KARL HAUSE looked up, ashen faced, from the wounded man's side. "Damn. Ya almost done fer him." His hand wagged as he looked at the swollen, purplish flesh of Ab Larson's shoulder, where Bright's slug had carved a gory passageway. "Trouble. That's all we've had since we left Taos."

If he was going to say more he never got the chance. Two things happened almost simultaneously. Fidelity Hause came running from the stopped wagons. She fell at the side of Larson, who was groaning and beginning to push himself into a sitting position. "Ab, are you badly hurt?"

Larson looked dumbly at Fidelity and amazement more than anything else shone on his face. He didn't answer. Coke wanted to be swallowed up by the hard earth at his feet as Fidelity swung slowly around, splotches of angry red on her creamy cheeks. "You killer. You aren't fit to associate with decent people."

She came up to her feet and her violet eyes were shades deeper than their natural color. "You know what I hinted at last night, and if you'd been smart you'd of left then," Coke stood transfixed. In her fury she was even more stunning than before.

Karl Hause was looking doubtfully at Coke as his daughter's tongue twisted under the impetus of her anger. "Those possemen that rode through Santa Ynez spoke of you. They were hunting you, probably for some murder or robbery." Coke opened his mouth and Fidelity leaned forward and fired her final salvo as Larson got painfully to his feet and pointed off toward the west, drawing Karl Hause's attention. "I heard those men say your name. They said 'Bright's a killer'; I heard that, and now I believe it." She spun on her heel and walked away.

"There're your migratin' Injins."

Coke yanked himself back with an effort and turned toward Larson, who, white-faced and venemous-eyed, was pointing with his good arm off toward a dust cloud. As Coke squinted into the distance, Hause threw an arm around Larson's shoulders and helped him toward the Hause wagon. Coke was left standing alone, watching the oncoming horde. He felt unsure and discouraged. Fidelity hated him. That she was mixed up, some way or another, didn't matter; that she hated him with all the animosity of her being was all that mattered. And too, the Indians that he had so confidently guessed as migrating hunters, were a war party.

And of course there was the shooting. That Larson and gone for his gun first didn't seem to matter to the emigrants; he had been shot, and that alone counted. Coke leaned back against one of the massive wagon wheels and watched the Indians stop out of rifle range and study the wagon train. He was bitter and angry and didn't hear the man come up beside him until he spoke. "That means trouble."

Coke turned indifferently and surveyed the shriveled old man beside him. He was leaning on a long, delicate looking rifle of ancient vintage. Coke nodded brusquely and looked back to where the Indians were talking among themselves. The old man's eyes were squinting against the off-center sun.

" 'Paches."

COKE TOOK another look. The old fellow was dressed like the other emigrants. A faded butternut shirt, heavy clod-hopper boots, woolen pants and a low topped, flat brimmed hat. But there was something else too, and it gave an incongrous touch to the otherwise drab individual at his side. A heavy handled Kiowa-Apache scalping knife in a beaded scabbard hung from the sweat stained belt at the oldster's waist. That wasn't emigrant equipment. Coke's eyes ambled back up to the man's face, and a dawning curiousity forced its way past his troubles. "Who're you?"

The narrow shoulders rose and fell eloquently and the squinted, faded old eyes swung slowly away from the Indians. "What difference does that make?"

Coke shrugged slightly and a hard grin flickered over his face. "None, I reckon," he answered; "none at all."

"Then I don't mind tellin' you. I'm Gus Hause." Coke started to say something but the old man read the question before it was out and nodded his grizzled head. "Yeah. I'm Fidelity's grandfather," he shucked a thumb over his shoulder toward the battered Conestoga behind the Karl Hause wagon. "That there's my rig."

His old eyes went back to the hesitating Indians. "I been on the frontier before, in your daddy's day; I've seen those varmints before too. Trouble, lad, trouble." He looked back at Coke. "Listen, lad. I've seen somethin' that Karl an' Fidelity hain't seen. Take my advice an' kill him next time." He nodded slightly. "There'll be a next time too, or I don't know Ab Larson."

The old eyes were coldly critical as they swept over Coke. "She could do worse, at that, but she won't do nothin' 'less you open her eyes for her."

"What're you talkin' about, anyway?"

"You hain't that dumb, cowboy. Fidelity; that's who I'm talkin' about. Think I hain't been watchin' you today? You're sweet on her. All right then, do som'thin' about it; don't jest stand aroun' every time she lights inter you. Dammit, boy, give her what fer."

Coke didn't have a chance to answer. He heard the rumble of horses and looked back; the Apaches were coming in. There were at least eighty fighting bucks in the coup party. Short, stocky men, with primitive hatred of their race ingrained in their features, for the transgressors before them.

Coke swung into his saddle and looked down at the old man. "Tell 'em to corral their wagons an' put their stock inside, if they can get it all in." He was gone as the old man nodded in that queer, offhand way he had. The emigrants were wringing their hands as Coke reined up beside Karl Hause's wagon. Hause and Fidelity were sitting, ashen faced, on the high seat.

Coke felt irritation at their inactivity. "You do a helluva lot of good sittin' up there like stuffed pigeons." A little ocular resentment showed but not enough. "Get your wagons into a circle an' bring your fightin' men out." He looked straight at Fidelity. "If you got any fightin' men."

Her cheeks showed a splash of crimson. "We have 'em, mister Bright. Not killers; just honest American fightin' men."

Coke smiled thinly. He had aroused the spirit he needed in the emigrants if they were going to make a fight of it. He nodded approvingly. "Then get 'em out here with their guns."

Karl Hause came out of his reverie with a start. The Apaches were riding in a large circle around the wagons. The noise of their cries, wild and bloodcurdling, were mixed with the frantic profanity of the emigrants circling their wagons into a small, tight little oval.

Hause grabbed his rifle from the wagon and leaped into the confusion,

bellowing orders in a loud, deep voice that arose above the reining pandemonium. "Women an' chil'run stay on the floor o' the wagons. Some o' you serve as loaders. Emil, break out that cask o' powder an' ladle it aroun'. Boys, stay behind som'thin'. Them heathen'll get you sure if'n you're in sight. Take yore time, boys, an' make every shot count."

COKE TURNED his horse loose inside the circle with the other snorting, frightened animals and dumped his riding gear unceremoniously inside Karl Hause's wagon, almost hitting Abner Larson with his saddle as he threw it over the high endgate. For a second their eyes met and Larson's held a crafty, ruthless smile. He didn't say a thing as Fidelity bandaged his swelling shoulder and he didn't have to. Coke understood; Larson would kill him yet, if he could, but now he wouldn't try it with fists or guns. He'd use stealth the next time.

The Indian attack was launched with wild, uncoordinated fury. The emigrants were white-faced and determined. There was an acrid odor of gunpowder in the clear, warm air and the defiant bellow of rifles and pistols created and sustained a clamor over which rode the screams of the Apaches, coming down the still air to the grim, embattled pioneers. Coke watched the battle with a feeling of impersonal detachment. He noted Fidelity's grandfather and father fighting side-by-side from beneath the younger man's wagon. Nothing was said as they loaded and fired with fair accuracy. He noticed two bronco bucks on the prairie beside their horses, hunkering in the grass. The Apaches were trying to kindle a fire but finally gave it up, remounted and joined their hard riding tribesmen in the siege-circle that was being maintained around the wagons. Having no rifle, Coke Bright fired infrequently; he seldom saw an Indian close enough to warrant a pistol shot.

The emigrants were giving an unusually good account of themselves. Apache warriors and horses lay in sprawled, deathly disarray, beyond the wagon circle. Coke saw an emigrant fall stiffly forward. He ran to the man, flopped him over, noted the ragged hole in his head, scooped up the rifle and leaped into the man's vacated firing spot. He had fired and was reloading when a long, whitish sliver of wood grooved its way out of the wagon box a foot from his head. Startled, Coke ducked unconsciously and finished reloading on one knee. His charge rammed securely home, he straightened up, saw a fast moving target, leaned forward a little to rest his rifle on a wagon wheel and tracked the Apache over his sights. His finger was tightening on the trigger when something like a red hot iron entered his body just above the hump of his left shoulder and ran down the full length of his left arm. The suddenness of the pain and the stunning shock of the blow knocked him a little off balance. He dropped the rifle and went down to both knees, holding the numb arm and dumbly watching the spread of scarlet through his buckskin shirt and where it dripped alarmingly, from below his cuff.

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A SICKENING sensation went through Coke as he forced his attention away from the shattered arm. The smell of gunpowder, the yells of the emigrants, the angry cries of the attacking Apaches and the deafening thunder of gunfire swooped in around him where he knelt. Suddenly a leaden ball smashed savagely into the edge of the massive old wagon tire above him. He realised his peril, at the same time that it suddenly dawned on him that the shots were aimed at him directly, and

were not errant slugs coming out of the maelstrom of the battle.

Rolling quickly sideways so as to achieve more protection from the marksman by gaining more shelter from the vast hulk of the old wagon next to him, Coke's right hand flashed in a blurring movement and came up with his holstered six gun. Steely hard, narrowed eyes searched the reigning pandemonium for his adversary. Deliberately he studied the milling emigrants, the closest Apaches and the defending riflemen. Slowly his eyes, casually, almost indifferently, flicked over the wagons themselves and he saw it. He looked twice to be sure but there was no mistaking it. A small opening in the back of the younger Hause's wagon showed the single, malevolent eye of a rifle barrel. It wasn't pointed at the Apaches beyond the wagons at all; its ugly snout was pointing across the wagon circle and downward, toward where Coke lay.

He hesitated for the briefest part of a long second. The thought flashed across his mind that Fidelity and her mother were in there. He knew who was shooting at him. Abner Larson. But still, if he fired back, there was a good chance that he might hit one of the women. Other thoughts chased themselves through his mind but he shoved them abruptly aside, figured Larson's position and squeezed his trigger. Just before his own gun went off, the rifle jerked spasmodically, wildly, and fell out of the wagon. Coke was mildly surprised as he pushed himself to his feet and, dodging among the snorting, wild eyed stock, made his way in a wobbly, erratic run, toward the wagon.

The high poop of the wagon was almost too much. He was trying to climb up the wheel spokes, still holding his gun, blood soaked and slippery with the gushing elixir of his body, when Fidelity's horrified, wide eyed face came out of the canvas.

In a flash she was beside him, ashen faced. "Sit down. Please don't try to climb up there."

She was pushing hard against his shoulder and he sagged back to the ground, an odd feeling of light headed sweetness sweeping through him. He didn't say anything as he sat down and leaned back against the wagon wheel. Fidelity pulled the shirt, soggy and red, off his upper body and, trembling and on the verge of actual illness, made a crude but effective tourniquet of his belt. The blood slowed and began to thicken, turning a thick, gelatinous maroon color.

Coke saw the girl clamber quickly back into the wagon and a sense of abiding appreciation settled over him as he watched the supple grace of her movements. He looked dizzily around as the sound of firing lessened. In the slowly gyrating, fuzzy perspective that had become his eyesight, a heavily beaded knife sheath dangled before him. It was an Indian sheath and, while he felt dimly that he'd seen it somewhere before, he coupled its sudden appearance with the lessening of the gunfire and vaguely had a notion that the Apaches had breached the wagon circle. Shaking his head ponderously, he reached behind him with his good arm and tried to push himself up. The beaded sheath came closer and a strong, firm hand pushed him back down. He felt petutantly annoyed that the Indian wouldn't let him get up. No man wanted to die sitting down. The pushing, insistent hand became a huge, heavy weight and it pushed harder and harder until Coke Bright fell beneath it and slid off the side of something into a huge bottomless pit of stygian darkness.

THERE were murmuring voices and the smell of wood fires and food coming into the high wagon when Coke opened his eyes. Gradually things came into focus. The high, sagging canvas of the wagon covering, grey and spotted, was overhead, the arched ribs, rubbed smooth and shiny from han-

dling, were evenly spaced around him. He looked down, at himself. He was beneath a mass of none too clean quilts and his arm was a formidable swath of pink tinted bandages, then his eyes, stronger, swung to his left and stopped. Fidelity Hause, her deep violet eyes somber and thoughtful, was watching him. He tried to smile apologetically and a look of quick reserve replaced the frank look of worry on her face.

"Are you feverish?" He wagged his head weakly, suddenly remembering that he had shot her fiance and wondering if she knew it. "I brought in some steak, just in case you're hungry." His eyes wandered from the thick crockery platter with the steaming meat to her white, capable hands, up her arms to the breadth and sturdiness of her bosom, beyond to the square, rounded shoulders and the handsome face beneath its canopy of taffy hair.

He smiled at the protruding, generous mouth and wide eyes. "Thanks, but I'm not hungry. What happened? I saw an In'yun once, then I don't remember any more."

"It wasn't an In'yun. It was gran'-pa's beaded knife sheath you saw. He helped me patch you up and put you in here. The Apaches left. They lost too many bucks, dad says, an' couldn't breach the wagons, so they left." Her eyes fell to her hands before the unblinking admiration that shone in his glance. She started to get up.

"No. Please sit here a minute." She relaxed again and looked gravely at him. He was going to ask about Larson, they both knew it, but each had a different dread of the topic. "Larson?"

"He was killed."

Coke's heart leaped a little. Her answer hadn't shown any great sorrow, only a sort of dull acknowledgement. "What happened?"

"He was shot." Suddenly her eyes, tortured and sad, swung up and met his steady stare. "Coke, do you know who shot you?"

He nodded slightly; she must have all. He didn't trust himself to answer and for the first time since he had seen her there beside him, his eyes faltered. It was a distasteful subject and he felt distinctly guilty.

"I know too." The words were slowly, clearly spoken and he looked at her again, surprised.

"Well," he was confused and wanted to soften her anguish. "I'm still around, so let's forget it."

"No; I also know something else. Do you remember when I said Westerners wore their guns so that they could rob emigrants?" He nodded. The statements had been made in the corral yard back at Santa Ynez and had puzzled him at the time.

"Well, the reason I said it was because I overheard the possemen that rode through town mention your name, Bright, as the renegade they were looking for." He frowned a little, wondering, and she blushed. "I'm sorry; I jumped to conclusions. I met you right after that and I didn't know you had any relatives in Santa Ynez. It wasn't you, after all; it was a cousin."

He understood and smiled with relief and was going to say something when he looked up and saw the beaded knife sheath in front of him. His eyes traveled up to the leathery, calm old face above.

Grandfather Hause knelt down beside them, his face grave. "Y'know, sometimes a man has to make himself figger things out." Both Coke and Fidelity looked their bewilderment.

The old man shrugged and settled himself comfortably on the rumpled quilts. "Seein' as how a man an' woman hadn't ought'ta sort o' wonder about things after they, ah, set up in housekeepin', an' there hadn't ought'ta be no secrets atween 'em, I just climb in here to settle som'thin' fer ya. Recollect, Coke, when you was under that wagon lookin' fer the rascal who was tryin' to kill ya?" Coke nodded.

"Well, d'ya recollect that Larson's rifle come a-bouncin' out'ta the wagon just before you shot at him?" Again the nod and the old man wagged his head slightly and tapped his own chest with a gnarled finger. "I shot just before you did. It was thisaway. I looked aroun', casual like, an' took in what was goin' on in a glance, figgered where Larson's body would be behind that there canvas, and shot him."

The old man's eyes went slowly, half fearfully, toward Fidelity, who was listening with a look of vast relief on her face. She nodded slowly. "Gran'pa, I saw Ab shoot at Coke, when he was loading the rifle. I was looking for him when Ab shot at him. I was horrified, and suddenly it dawned on me what kind of a man Ab was—"

Grandfather Hause's seamed old shrewd face wrinkled suddenly as he got up. "Della, just why was you lookin' around fer this young buck anyway?" He began to edge out of the wagon with a significant grin on his face. "Wasn't just a might worried, was ya?" His body disappeared beyond the high seat and a musical old chuckle came back to them in the strained silence.

Coke reached out with his good hand and let his fingers cover the passive head of the blushing, confused girl. "Della, I'm awful glad I didn't kill him."

She nodded quickly and her eyes, dewy with a moist light, came up and met his frankly and tenderly. "So am I; it would have been something between us."

★

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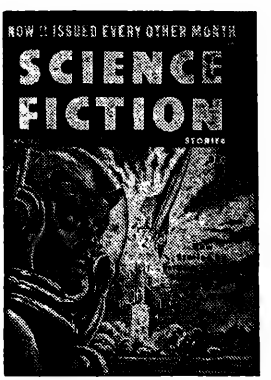

THE GIFT OF THE GODS by Raymond F. Jones

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Hazel had thrown Lafe Garvin over years ago because we wouldn't quit hellin' around. But now she was hoping that Lafe hadn't become too tame.

FETCH ME BRANNON'S EARS

by Seven Anderton

APRIL DUSK had fallen when Lafe Garvin and Ira Porter rode over a ridge and saw Broken Bow lying ahead of them in the valley. The Black Hills lay four days of hard riding behind. Their horses were travel thinned.

Garvin was lanky, of medium height, and weather-tanned to a coffee brown. There was a saddle bend in his legs. The gray in hair and mustache said he was not young, but his word would have been taken had he claimed to be anything from forty to sixty. The blue eyes under ragged brows were sharp and keen; he moved with easy coordination, and rode like he was part of his horse.

Porter was not yet thirty, a hair under six feet tall, and so solidly and smoothly built that he appeared twenty pounds lighter than his actual two hundred. His lean face was slightly hawk-like, his eyes gray and his blond hair threatened with red.

Well worn range garb and gear marked the pair as saddle tramps who knew their way about the wide frontier.

Smooth walnut grips of .45 Colt revolvers protruded from low hung holsters on their gun belts.

"There she is," Lafe Garvin said. "She's growed some;last time I seen her there wasn't no railroad, and I figgered I'd never come back again on purpose."

"Why?" Gordon asked.

Garvin chuckled. "My heart was busted. The only gal I ever wanted to hitch up with married a harness maker because I wouldn't quit hellin' around, and make somethin' better than a cowpoke and buffalo hunter out of myself. Her and me was right soft on each other, but she said a girl had to have a man she could depend on. Her name was Hazel Williams. Wonder if she's still around Broken Bow; mebby I'll find out if we stay around long enough."

"Seems I heard somewhere that the town is still plenty salty," Ira said.

"Mebby so," Lafe replied; "we'll likely find out."

It was full dark when the comrades pulled their horses up at a water trough in the middle of the town's principal street. The street was lighted by lamps atop posts and the radiance from the windows of saloons and a few stores.

"Yonder is a beanery," Ira said, "and I could use some grub."

Lafe grunted. "You was hungry eight years ago when I run across you at Fort Laramie and you ain't never got over it. But we might as well go eat. Won't do the horses any hurt to cool out 'fore we put 'em up for the night."

The place to which Ira had called attention was a two-story frame building. Yellow lamp light shone through a window upon which painted lettering read:

MA'S RESTAURANT
ROOMS

As they tied their horses in front Lafe said, "Looks like supper's over. Nobody in there. But mebby we can anyhow fix for a place to sleep 'fore we look around."

THE RESTAURANT had a counter along one side, six tables and a desk and cigar counter just inside the entrance. There was a room register on the desk. A woman came hurrying through an archway that led to the kitchen. She was buxom and rosy-cheeked, with lively brown eyes and abundant dark hair touched but lightly with gray.

"Supper's over," she said as she stepped behind the desk. "We stop serving at seven, but if—"

"Well dang me, Hazel," Lafe cut her off, "if you ain't even purtier than you used to be."

She gave him a sharp look, then recognition dawned in her eyes. "Lafe Garvin!" she exclaimed. "You wouldn't look so bad yourself if you'd shave off that soup-strainer; what are you doin' in Broken Bow?"

"Me and Ira Porter here," Lafe told her, "just come out of the Black Hills with a purty good stake and a hankerin' to see how folks are livin' back east. Figger to take the train from here—mebby as far as St. Louis. How's Edgar?"

"Edgar got killed seven years ago," she answered.

Too bad," Lafe registered no deep sorrow. "You married again?"

"No," she said flatly, then hurried on, "If you and your friend are hungry, I can scrape up what's left in the kitchen. And I got a room if you want to put up for the night."

"We can use the room," Lafe said, "and I can eat most anything; but Ira has got bad stummick trouble."

Hazel's glance at the robust Ira was sympathetic until she saw his grin.

"He just can't seem to get the danged thing full nohow," Lafe added.

She sniffed. "There's anyhow one way you ain't changed, Lafe Garvin; you two come on back to the kitchen."

In the kitchen, a girl of nineteen was

putting washed dishes onto shelves. She was a well rounded brunette with pixie-like attractiveness.

"This is my daughter Sarah," Hazel said needlessly—since the resemblance was so marked. "Sarah, this is Lafe Garvin and Ira Porter; I'm going to rustle them up some supper."

Sarah Grove regarded Lafe for a moment with interest, then her dark eyes went to Ira Porter and remained fixed. Ira seemed fascinated. Neither of them paid any attention when Lafe said, "By gum, she's mighty near as purty as you was—I mean are—"

"You mean *was,*" Hazel cut him off, "and you're still lyin' because she's prettier. Sarah, you better run along to the quilting party. I'll feed these two and finish up here."

"What?" Sarah said, tearing her gaze away from Ira. "Oh yes, mother. I guess I'd better." She took off her apron and hung it on a wall hook.

"Better go out the back way," her mother said—and Sarah did.

FIFTEEN minutes later Lafe and Ira were eating the bountiful meal Hazel Grove had "scraped up" and placed on an oilcloth covered kitchen table. She sat at the end of the table, ready to bring more.

"Mighty nice to see you again, Hazel," Lafe said. "I ain't heard nothin' from here for a long time."

"I heard about you now and then," she said. "Last time was four-five months ago. Some men rode through here and was talking about you and Wild Bill Hickok raising Old Ned up in Dakota." She regarded him steadily for a moment, then continued, "Lafe, this may surprise you, but I wish you had rode in here as young and hellacious as you used to be."

Lafe gulped a mouthful of food and stared at her. "Well I be jiggered," he said. "Why?"

"Because," she replied. "The minute you show up where he is—Gabe Brannon—he's the marshal here—is goin' to make you take off your guns. He don't allow anybody to wear guns in town, and he will be plumb mean about it. If you was the young hellion you used to be you'd kill him; and if there was ever a job that needed doing that's it."

Lafe had lost interest in food. "Danged if you don't sound plumb bloodthirsty," he said. "Well, Hazel, I ain't as young as I used to be—which same I can't help. But one thing is plumb certain—when any gent makes me shuck my hardware I'll be dead. What puzzles me is hearin' you say you want to see any man—'specially a lawman—salivated. What got you to feelin' thataway?"

She didn't answer the question. "I'm sorry I said that, Lafe," she said. "I guess you ain't changed any other ways—but you *are* older, and I don't want you to get—hurt. Didn't you ever hear of Gabe Brannon?"

"Um," Lafe said. "Seems I did hear Broken Bow had a holy terror of a marshal—but the name slipped my mind. What's he been doin' that makes you want somebody to fetch you his ears?"

"He's a beast," Hazel replied bitterly. "You can't blame everybody for being afraid of him. He's quicker than lightning with his gun—and he's itching every minute to use it. He's killed seven men in the two years he's been here, and crippled several and run a lot more out of town. It was a sorry day for Broken Bow when Ben Slatt and Alva Dingman and that bunch brought him here."

"Alva Dingman!" Lafe exclaimed. "That polecat I know about; Hickok and me hightailed him out of Abilene once. What's he doin' here?"

"He runs the *Hot Time* saloon; it's a hellhole. This town was bad before he came, but he lined up with Ben Slatt and the others and made it ten times worse. Ben Slatt is the banker, and there's half a dozen others—like Abe Hiller that runs the *Emporium* and they run the town. They got most of the folks in debt to them, or buffaloed

one way or another. They hired Gabe Brannon to do their dirty work—and there don't seem to be any way to get rid of him. Elections is just a joke. They run them. I've been sore tempted to load up Edgar's old shotgun and kill Gabe Brannon myself when he comes pesterin' around."

"Brannon's been botherin' you, that it?" Lafe's eyes grew cold.

"Me!" Hazel exclaimed. "I wish—I just wish he would. He's got a crazy notion about Sarah. She can't hardly even speak to any other fellow. Brannon warns 'em off—and they know he'd just as soon kill them as look at them. He—"

"How old is Brannon?" Lafe cut her off.

"Must be close to forty," she replied. "But he's wicked bad, Lafe. Don't you go and—"

"I'm a purty ornery galoot myself," Lafe told her. "Seems you told me that a good many times. I reckon I'll have to take me a sashay around town and find out whether a gent can't wear his ornaments in a free country." He pushed back his chair.

"No, Lafe," Hazel protested.

IRA HAD stopped eating to listen with interest when Hazel spoke of Bannon's attentions to Sarah. He stood up with Lafe.

"You ain't in on this," Lafe said.

"Who's goin' to keep me out?" Ira retorted. "I'll go along, or be pretty close behind."

Their eyes locked for a moment, then Lafe said, "Mebby you can be handy at that—if you'll do like I say. You know you ain't fast enough to draw against a holy terror, but you're a sidewinder other ways, I'll admit. You go up to our room and leave your artillery."

After hesitating a moment, Ira started to unbuckle his gunbelt. "I'll leave it right here—"

"I said up in the room," Lafe stopped him.

Lafe's left eyelid had drooped slightly. Ira nodded understanding. Lafe turned his head and looked a question.

"Number three," Hazel Grove said, "just at the top of the stairs."

"Lafe," Hazel said anxiously when Ira had gone, "I wish you wouldn't—"

"You don't wish nothin' of the sort," Lafe said calmly. "That purty little gal might be ours if I had knowed once what I know now—and not gone hellin' off to Wyoming when I did. Mebby you and me might unmake a mistake or two after I do some palaverin' with this Brannon jasper."

They stood for a long minute, speaking only with their eyes. Then Lafe said, "Ira's comin' downstairs. I better go."

"I—I have to hope you can, Lafe," she said softly.

"Can what?" he said, turning back at the archway.

"Bring me Brannon's ears," she replied. Tears were brimming in her eyes.

BUSINESS—drinking, gambling and dancing—was in full blast when Lafe and Ira entered the *Hot Time* saloon. They found a place to belly up to the long bar. Lafe ordered beers. They sipped the beverage while surveying the crowd in the smoke-hazy room.

"See the gent with the slicked down black hair and the dinky mustache down yonder at the end of the bar?" Lafe said. "That's Alva Dingman; I'm wonderin' if he'll know me when he looks around."

They were looking at the flashily dressed proprietor when a gruff voice at Lafe's elbow said, "All right, feller, shed that belt and gun and pass it over to the bartender. Nobody wears hardware in this town."

The speaker was a big, sandy-haired man. His beefy face was florid but not unhandsome. His sharp black eyes were steady and his right hand hovered near the butt of his holstered Colt. A polished star shone on his unbuttoned vest.

Lafe Garvin put down his beer glass and stepped back slightly as he turned to face the speaker. Ira Porter stayed close to Lafe's back.

"Nobody?" Lafe said, looking at the marshal's gun.

"Nobody but me," Gabe Brannon snarled. "Unwrap that belt and pass it over—quick and careful."

Neither man had spoken softly and the crowd grew suddenly silent. Even players at the card tables stopped to watch what was happening. Customers nearest to Lafe and the marshal began to edge away.

"Now, mister," Lafe said. "I can't rightly do that. I just as soon be barefooted in a patch of sandburrs as out in public without my hawgleg. Sort—"

"Gabe, be careful!" a frantic voice shouted from the rear of the bar. The sudden silence had drawn the attention of Alva Dingman. "That's Lafe Garvin," Dingman screamed, "and he's a poison dirty killer."

Lafe did not raise his voice, but it cut clearly through the tense dive.

Without removing his cold gaze from the marshal, Lafe said, "You're a damned liar, Dingman. You know I never shot a man that didn't draw first, and at that I never killed but two. I just fixed the rest so they wouldn't never be handy with a gun again. If this pet wolf of yours tries to draw on me, he ain't ever goin' to have much use for his gun hand afterwards. I'm waitin' for him to reach."

Then Lafe added a sentence that puzzled his hearers—with the possible exception of Ira Porter. "Come to think of it," Lafe said, "you could get better ears offen a jackrabbit."

The silence was heavy for long moments. Then Lafe said. "Dingman, tell your star-totin' lobo to draw or pull in his horns. Seems to me that iffen I was runnin' a no-gun town I would do it by provin' I was man enough to do it without wearin' one myself."

Alva Dingman had crouched until only his head was visible. "Gabe," he shouted, "let that crazy killer alone. This is a law-abiding town; we'll take care of him later."

Lafe and Brannon stood with eyes locked. "Well," Lafe said, "you goin' to try it now or behind my back?"

"You heard the mayor's orders." Brannon snarled. "Now you get out of here—and you better get out of town."

Lafe nudged Ira with an elbow, then said. "I'll be around for a spell; got interests. But I'll mosey along. This dump stinks of skunk anyhow."

Ira Porter had already walked towards the door. Lafe followed, looking over his shoulder. Other men, many of them looking pleased, cleared his path.

A LAMP on the desk was turned low and the kitchen was dark when Lafe and Ira returned to Hazel Grove's place. They had been absent less than a half hour.

Hazel rose from a chair placed where she could watch the street. "What happened?" she asked as she turned up the lamp.

"Nothin' much," Lafe told her. "Brannon talked rough, but 'peared shy about reachin' for his iron." He grinned. "I was given to understand that this here town is law-abidin' and will take care of me later. I'm lookin' forward."

"You better look behind pretty often, too," she said. "That outfit will get you foul, Lafe. I wish you'd pull out for—"

"Now, Hazel," Lafe cut in, "you ever know me to start a undertakin' and then tuck my tail?"

She sighed. "No, I didn't. But please be careful; this is going to make Brannon all the meaner about Sarah when he finds out you're our friend. He's plumb ruining her life."

"Such as how?" Lafe asked.

"She can't even go to the Saturday night dances. Brannon asks her to go with him every week. She won't—but she's afraid to go with any other fellow, even if they wasn't afraid to take her."

Ira broke his scowling silence. "Tomorrow's Saturday. Is there a dance?"

"Yes," Hazel said, "but don't you—"

"Mebby," Ira interrupted, "I'll collect Brannon's ears 'fore Lafe gets around to it."

"Well, well," Lafe said. "Let's put our horses away and roll in ourselves. Tomorrow might be sort of strenerous."

Lafe and Ira came down to breakfast early but a few shop workers and the crew of a freight train were ahead of them. Sarah Grove was waiting tables while her mother minded the kitchen. Lafe and Ira took the vacant table nearest the entrance to the kitchen. Hazel popped out of the kitchen to take their order. It was simple. Ham and eggs.

"They're up to no good," Hazel said in a low voice as she bent above the table. "Brannon always comes in early on Saturday to ask Sarah if she's decided to go to the dance. He ain't been in; you watch out."

"Allus do," Lafe assured her.

Hazel returned to the kitchen. Soon afterwards Sarah brought their food.

"Miss Sarah," Ira Porter asked bluntly, "would you go to the dance with me tonight?"

Her cheeks flushed. "I can't; it would only make trouble."

"There's goin' to be trouble anyhow," Ira said.

"I'm afraid so," she agreed. "I'll let you know." She left to wait on a man who was tapping the cigar case with a coin as he looked over the room.

Ten minutes later, as Lafe and Ira were finishing their meal, Hazel screamed from the kitchen, "Lafe, look out!"

But she was too late. Two men had entered by the back door. While one of them struggled with Hazel the other stepped out of the kitchen and thrust the muzzle of a shotgun against Lafe Garvin's back. At the same moment Marshal Brannon and Alva Dingman, both armed, entered by the front door.

"Freeze, Garvin, or I'll blow you apart," barked the man with the shotgun. He was a bartender from the *Hot Time*. "I'm a deputy."

"That's right, Garvin," Brannon affirmed as he approached with Dingman at his elbow, "And you're under arrest for resisting an officer. Stand up careful so I can get your gun."

Two minutes later Lafe was being marched off to jail. Gabe Brannon turned back to snarl at Ira Porter, "and you, feller-walk mighty careful around here; don't tie on any hardware."

Ira sat still at the table and made no reply. Lafe had instructed him before they came down from their room. Hazel Grove, freed by her captor when he was sure Lafe had been taken, came out of the kitchen, disheveled and panting.

"Lafe," she screamed, "don't try to escape. Gabe Brannon killed a man for that, but nobody saw it happen."

"I won't," Lafe replied. "I know about snakes and—"

He was stopped by Alva Dingman's fist smashing into his face. "You keep still," Dingman snarled, "until you talk to the judge."

BRANNON and his henchmen departed with their prisoner. Hazel glared at Ira Porter. "Ain't you going to do something?" she demanded.

"I'm goin' to do near as I can what Lafe told me to," Ira replied, "but I got a few ideas of my own—seein' that Lafe didn't figger on anything like this. You think Brannon will come back here?"

The restaurant was empty, everybody having gone outside to watch the progress towards the town jail. Even Sarah had stepped outside the front door.

"Sure he will," Hazel replied, "he'll not miss a chance to crow for Sarah."

"Ain't there even one man in this town with enough gall to give me a little help?" Ira asked.

"Help with what?" Hazel asked.

It took Ira several minutes to tell her. When he had finished she was regarding him with respect.

"Can you do that?" she asked.

"I will," he said grimly.

"Then I'm all the help you need," she declared. "A man might get shot, but even these skunks ain't goin' to shoot a woman. You hustle along and get ready. Brannon won't waste much time gettin' back here."

"They took him into the jail," Sarah reported as she came back into the restaurant.

"You go back to the kitchen and stay there," her mother said. "Ira and me got things to do; don't you get in our way."

Twenty minutes had passed when Marshal Gabe Brannon emerged from the jail and cut across the street towards the Grove restaurant. He was strutting. Hazel Grove stood at the window and watched his approach. Just behind her, a ten-gauge, double-barreled shotgun leaned against the end of the desk.

Brannon stepped onto the sidewalk, grinning triumphantly at Mrs. Grove. She glared back at him. Then, from an open window in the end of the upstairs hall, the loop of a lariat dropped over the marshal and was jerked tight. A moment later his feet were dangling two feet above the sidewalk. Hazel Grove turned, snatched up the shotgun and stepped outside.

Brannon saw her and stopped yelling as he looked into the twin muzzles of the scattergun. "Shut up," she said, "or I'll fill you so full of buckshot that you won't float in brine."

She stepped up to the dangling marshal, snatched the Colt from his holster and backed away. She dropped the revolver at her feet and steadied the shotgun. "Come on down, Ira," she called. "He'll be here—one way or another."

IRA CAME down the quickest way. The rope went slack and Brannon sprawled on the sidewalk. Ira Porter landed beside him.

"Get up, you skunk," Ira panted as he gained his balance.

Brannon scrambled up. "You're foolin' with the law," he warned, backing against the building.

Brannon's yells had brought people into the street. Among these were Alva Dingman and his shotgun-armed bartender. Dingman drew his revolver as they ran towards the scene. They were passing Sid Holt's hardware store when Sid stepped out of the doorway with an axehandle he had snatched up. Sid had no idea what the hubbub was about, but on general principals he swung the axehandle and knocked the bartender flat. Then he traded the axehandle for the shotgun and ran on towards the focal point of ruckus.

From his blacksmith shop across the street from the Grove restaurant, brawny Bill O'Shea came running with a red hot horseshoe held in a pair of tongs. "You need any help, Hazel?" he yelled.

"Looks like I got it, whether I need it or not," she replied.

The spark had been dropped into the powder keg that was Broken Bow. Nearly a hundred men gathered quickly—and it was a grim assembly.

"What's goin' on here?" the blacksmith demanded.

"If you'll get back and give him room," Hazel Grove answered, "this young fellow is about to beat hell out of Gabe Brannon for botherin' Sarah." Her shotgun was still steady on the cowering Brannon.

The blacksmith glanced over the suddenly quiet crowd, then back at Ira Porter. "Good idea," he said. "Start in, mister, we'll keep it fair." A growl of affirmation came from the gathering.

It was then that Ira Porter squared his shoulders, faced the assembled men and displayed the quality that was to make him a state senator some ten years later. "I'd sure enjoy doin' that." he said, "but if I cripple him up it

might give him a excuse. Seems to me like if this town has got to have a gun boss we ought to find out who it is. I think his name is Lafe Garvin and he's down yonder in the jail where a bunch of damn cowards put him a little while ago. Let's get him out of there and let him and Brannon settle it out here in the street."

The crowd's response to the proposal was silence until Alva Dingman spoke up, "As mayor of this town—"

The shotgun which Sid Holt thrust against his back choked Dingman off. "As mayor of this town," Sid snapped, "S'pose you shut up and lay down with your pups until we mebby have a honest election. Well, some of you gents get them jail keys offen Brannon."

FIFTEEN minutes later, Lafe Garvin and Gabe Brannon stood in the dusty street, surrounded by a dozen grim-faced men. His belt and gun had been restored to Lafe and Brannon's weapon was back in its holster.

"Brannon," Bill O'Shea said "you have gun-bullied this town for more'n two years. Garvin, here says you ain't man enough to do that. We aim to find out. You are goin' to stand right here and we'll take Garvin way down yonder by the feed store. Then you and him start walkin' towards each other. I got to tell you that Garvin wants you to know he ain't goin' for his gun first."

Brannon licked his lips and said nothing. Sid Holt and another man walked away with Lafe. A minute later the blacksmith said, "Go ahead, Brannon; Garvin is comin'."

The other men in the street moved quickly away. The throng on the sidewalks took shelter in doorways or inside, behind windows. Alone in the sunbathed street, Brannon and Garvin walked towards each other, hands held at thighs but not swinging. A hundred yards had separated them at the start. Then it was eighty—seventy—fifty.

At that distance Brannon suddenly halted. He stood like a man frozen, making no move to draw his weapon. Lafe Garvin came steadily on. Forty yards—twenty—ten. Still neither man had moved a hand towards his gun. Even those fartherest away could see that Brannon was trembling. Otherwise, he seemed unable to move. Without haste, Lafe Garvin came on, stopped face-to-face with Brannon and reached a brown hand to lift the gun from Brannon's holster and fling it aside. Then, first with his open right hand, then with his left, he slapped Brannon hard on either cheek. Brannon fell sidewise into the dust and lay whimpering. The blustering town tamer had broken completely.

Lafe Garvin stooped, grasped a handful of collar and dragged Brannon towards where Hazel Grove stood in the restaurant doorway with her arms about her daughter. Silence still hung heavy.

Lafe looked at Hazel and his lips twitched. "Here they are," he said. "They're still fastened onto him, but if you got a knife handy—"

"I don't want them!" her scream cut him off. "Lafe Garvin, you ain't human." She turned and pulled Sarah with her into the restaurant.

Confused, Lafe looked down at the limp hulk of Brannon. "Say!" he exclaimed. "This buzzard looks dead."

Doctor Howard Ong, coming from among the spectators, confirmed Lafe's judgement a few moments later. A strong shock can stop a rotten heart, and Brannon wasn't the first man whose wounded vanity proved mortal. Ira Porter went into the restaurant to tell Sarah and her mother.

LAFE GARVIN turned to where Alva Dingman stood in the encircling crowd. "Dingman," he said, "I helped run you out of one town; if you're in this one at sundown you won't be able to leave afterwards."

Dingman turned to push frantically through the crowd. "Let me away from him!" he yammered.

"Folks," Bill O'Shea's voice boomed, "don't forget there's a dance tonight. Let's make her a celebration. These things has to happen—and this one was sure overdue."

Lafe Garvin went into the restaurant and found Ira with the widow and her daughter in the kitchen.

"Look, Hazel," Lafe said. "I only done what you asked me to. I didn't intend to kill him at all—just fix him so he couldn't be handy with a gun any more. But he wouldn't draw."

There was silence for moments, then Hazel said, "I guess you ain't to blame, Lafe. Sarah, here it is almost ten o'clock and dinner ain't even started."

Lafe and Ira escorted the widow and her daughter to the dance that night at town hall. Bill O'Shea broke it up before midnight.

"We got some business," the blacksmith announced. "The menfolks are goin' to take the ladies home now. Then all of them that is legal voters is comin' back here for a meetin'. Seein' that our mayor skedaddled east on the evenin' train, and we are likewise shy a marshal, it looks like some reorganizin' was in order."

Lafe, Ira and Hazel and Sarah Grove had eaten and were lingering over coffee around the kitchen table when Bill O'Shea arrived.

"Hoped I'd find you fellers up," the blacksmith said. "I been sent to tell you that the meetin' picked you two for marshal and mayor. Like to know if we can count on you."

Ira Porter was the first to find voice. "I couldn't be no mayor," he protested.

The blacksmith chuckled. "You got it the wrong way around. We figger we don't want any more gun marshals; this here is goin' to be a law-abidin' town. Some of us heard you offer to knock the stuffin' out of a bigger man than you are, so we picked you for marshal. Same time, we'd like to know that if any gunslingers was to come around we could call on the mayor to cool 'em off. How about it?"

"Well," Lafe Garvin said, "I been about everything but a mayor. Guess I could take a crack at it—providin' it don't interfere with me gettin' married." He looked at the widow Grove.

The widow's face flushed. Her eyes fell. "I don't think it will," she said.

Lafe looked around and saw Ira whispering in Sarah Grove's not unwilling ear. He grinned at the stalwart blacksmith.

"Not to hurt your feelin's," Lafe said, "but it seems to me you are sort of unnecessary around here right now."

O'Shea departed without argument.

★

A Thrilling Novelet of Outlawed Hope

RIDE WITH THE NIGHT

by

W. Edmunds Claussen

leads off the current issue of

FAMOUS WESTERN

Buckshot Roberts left no written statement when he died, his body racked by bullet lead. Had he left such a document, this — perhaps — might be the way it would read...

LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF BUCKSHOT ROBERTS

by W. Edmunds Claussen

I'M AN OLD man, bent up pretty bad from the buckshot that's in my body. I don't too much like the color that's come over the country. A man's got to say right out if he's for or against the McSween bunch or Major Murphy. Meet a pair of horsemen on the trail and you got to keep one hand on your pistol and be ready to shoot. If they ask what you think about politics you got to figure ahead fast. Sayin' you're neutral is the same as blowin' your breath into a Norther; it don't mean a thing. You got to pick sides—an' pick 'em with wisdom!

That's what it's like ridin' straight into the middle of the Lincoln County War. Many a fellow's found it out comin' into the Territory without realizing he had to choose which way he meant to fight—or else die.

I'm mostly a self-educated man who's found things out along the cattle trails. I seen all this happen before in Texas. When the Army mustered me out there was cattle on every grassy hummock. They just plain multiplied during the War when nobody took time or bother to count. But it didn't last long that way. Folks got to heating irons whenever they run into the critters, and they weren't particular if they was neighbors' cows or not. There was a blood-lettin' war a-breedin' on my doorstep. I was a younger man then, and thoughtful of the suffering of the womanfolk and the younguns; I got out.

I joined with the Rangers. That's where the lead in my belly came from. Folks called me Buckshot because I got plenty of it in me. But this ain't nobody's business. I like to let folks talk and wonder. It won't hurt them to use their brains that much if they're

SPECIAL FEATURE

a mind to. I learnt a deal and got to be a sight harder since them vendetta days along the Texas border.

But it's like these folks here went off that same half-cocked, crazy way. It don't make much difference who started it all. Tunstall's dead, and so are a half dozen others they just threw under the grass. Good men to ride the range with, most of 'em. It was only the poison that got into their blood. The killin' poison. Somebody burnt a cow that belonged to another and they found themselves on this side of the fence or the other.

It's like raw fire eatin' into the heart of a clean, young forest. Pretty soon there ain't so many straight and young trees left. Only human beings are different from trees; they don't have to stay rooted where they're growin'. McSween, he *could* move on with his bag and duffle, but he ain't going to; he'd take a licking, maybe, if he sold his belongings.

But that ain't a tithe to what he'll lose if he stays!

Shoot, there I go takin' sides. But that ain't takin' sides; that's just sense God gave a horse. If you know a bunch has got their big iron trained on your belly you're using what little judgement He gave you to pull stakes before they blow out your guts. Besides which, that's not taking into account the stirring up your doing of others, and taking them along to Glory Be.

When McSween brings in a wild bunch to keep clear his back while he's going around carrying a Bible and mouthin' thin scriptures—that just ain't right. That little runt he's taken up with called the Kid. That Billy! He's just a hired-out gunhand; he's a wild one. I seen it in his eyes the first time I looked at him. He was the sort that brewed all that bullet hell in Texas that I was tryin' to get away from.

Just like the other night when I speak my mind to Frank Coe. I said to him—but that's nobody's business. I say I'm neutral and I'll stick it out that way.

MAYBE I'M neutral, and maybe I'm not, as I plod along my Jenny mule nearer the Apache Mescalero reservation. I know way down in my heart a man's got to have some feelings or else he'd be the same as dead. And I sure enough got mine. I should have kept my mouth shut to neighbor Frank Coe, but it pains me to see the way these fellows make up to that quick-eyed little sneak thief of a Kid. The Coe brothers are good neighbors. Best follows to live close by a man could ask.

Now I see a sight that sets the blood pumpin' faster underneath my shirt. The glint of the noon sun hitting the half-dry Tularosa, the slope reaching up to Blazer's mill. There's a dozen horses here in the shade. More than a dozen. I touch my Jenny with my bootheel and let my eye drift over the brands, sortin' them out. I know all of the jaspers, and I know they're here lyin' for me.

I guess I know those thirteen killers will blow a hole in my middle if I give them a chance. I know, all right, that it's finish before my Jenny mule touches her feet in the river. Well, boy, I figure, you've run far enough to stay out of trouble. You ain't runnin' no further; get along with you and stick it out.

My fingers tighten on my rifle and I get it up across my saddle without making it seem a warlike intention. Then I squint down my eyes to make sure I know these fellows scurrying around.

It's Bowdre and Skurlock for sure. They got a place on the Ruidoso not far from mine. They bought it from Fritz and Murphy without paying much down, and the Major's been carrying them a long time. They got no right to go fighting against him now. Then there's the Kid's horse, that sulking two-bit killer, and John Middleton,

Tom O'Folliard, Jim French, Hendry Brown, Frank McNab. All fellows who cut their eye teeth on a pistol barrel. Dick Brewer is likely to be here somewhere. Dick's been named deputy constable by Justice of Peace Wilson, and he's got something in his craw. He took it hard when they killed Tunstall, who was his boss. I guess a man would feel kind of touchy when he figures somebody he likes got a dose of lead. But even at that, you don't have to strap guns on hired killers and shoot holes all through Lincoln County folk who just aim to be let alone.

I get a glimpse of Doc Skurlock duckin' through Blazer's door and know they've seen me comin'. He's letting the others know I'm on my way. Little fingers of ice are playing around my belly; there's sparks of dry fire at work over my scalp. I know there's lead waitin' for me the other side of the river.

Maybe they'll shoot before Jenny dips her foot in the Tularosa. A man don't have much to say which side of the fence he's on when he gets caught in the soup the way I am. But why should they send all these gunnies after me? I'm just a worn down cripple; can't get a rifle up to my shoulders anymore, and I've heard plenty of kids say about me: "Pick him up by the heels and buckshot'll run out of his ears." Those fellows are the saltiest bunch New Mexico ain't yet hung. They didn't have to come in a pack like this after one old horse.

The sun can't dry my sweat quick enough so that big beads are running down my face. But I try to keep a blank look. Somehow I start to whistle, low, under my breath. I kick my Jenny in the slats and we get started into the water. When I glance up I see Frank Coe coming toward me. I push my gun barrel out in front, but I see Frank ain't wearing his belt gun. He's coming out under the white flag. Then I get a drift of what I've been whistling:

"Beat the drums lowly and play your fifes slowly,
Play the dead march as you drag me along!"

IT PUTS little creepers to work up and down my neck. I can see Frank's heard the tail end of my whistlin' and he's got a funny, scared look to his face. He tries to be friendly: "Buckshot, don't mix in this. We're not after you, but turn your mule around and hit for the brush."

I give him a straight look he can hardly take. "Since when ain't it possible for a man to ride to Blazer's and shuck saddle? I'm here, and here I aim to stay!"

His lips move and something falls out but it's not words you could understand. He's just plain upset and worried. I can see him run the edge of his tongue around over his mouth and then swallow; I like the Coe boys, and I sure hate to fight them.

Now Bowdre and Middleton show themselves at the corner of the brush patch. I know the guns are ready to let loose. I hit the ground talking to Frank, low under my breath: "Frank, you come out here to keep me busy so they could get their guns on me!"

"No, Buckshot! But I tell you again to shuck out."

I guess I'm just a stubborn mule. I see the mill door before me and I make for it a-hellin'. I've got my rifle up as far as it will lift against my hip. If they let go on me I aim to blow the first one apart. Hell, I'm neutral and that way I expect to stay!

Charlie Bowdre comes sneaking around the corner looking me over a quick minute. He's got a Colt in his hand and a cock-sure gleam in his eye. He begins to grin devilishly. "Throw up your hands, old man; you're under arrest!"

"For what?" I ask. "So you can shoot me in the back while you're taking me to Lincoln?"

He's turned a little white, and I'm not sure which one of us let loose first. The shock of his ball hitting throws me against the doorjamb and for a little while the sun drops under the hill. I know the rifle has kicked in my hands. With the instinct of a fighter that I guess all frontier men have got I keep right on shooting. When the light begins to shine again I can't see Bowdre. His gunbelt's lyin' there in the grass, the buckle shot clean off. I figure I shot him through the middle.

There's a dozen guns yammerin' in my face as I start throwing lead back, fast as I can pump shells into my chamber. My chest is beginning to hurt. I feel too weak to stand without the wall at my back. But those fellows ain't workin' in any closer. I get a glimpse of Middleton stumbling out of sight and grabbing for his heart. I guess I got him.

The smoke is so thick in my face I can barely see George Coe. It's building in layers around his face and reefling his expression. And yet he's got the frontier hard vindictiveness about him and stamped across his mouth. An eye for an eye—the Murphy bunch has done something to George, and so he must have it figured he's got some reason to fight with me. When I shoot him I hear his yell, but I don't know what he's said.

He drops his pistol and runs; the fingers of his gunhand are dripping blood all over.

The Kid, Billy, is just now swinging into action. I see him pull down his sixgun at me and I'm right glad to let him have a shot in return. The ball must have tweeked his ears for he sure pulled back his buck-toothed face in a hurry. All at once it's quiet around Blazer's. It's a strange, eerie lull while all the world is still primed to kill. And it's me they're fixin' to kill! I can hear my blood dripping onto the stones. I know it can't last this way so I climb into the mill and slam the door.

Outside I can hear Blazer talking to the bunch, trying to call them off. "There's nine or ten of you fellows all shooting at an old man who's still holding you off. He's going to die anyhow; can't you let it go?"

"Like hell we will!" Dick Brewer yells, and he's mad. When he gets that way nothing can drag him off. He says he'll take me in if he tears the building down. I know he means it.

My gun is empty and I have to reload in a hurry. I stomp through the rooms of Blazer's place hunting for something that will shoot. Finally I locate a Sharps rifle. I'm trembling from one end to the other with weakness now and I know our fight is almost finished. I'm growing dizzy fast, but I know this much, too: I will hold out as long as my powder lasts. There's still one code a man lives up to. He should show how tough he can get when somebody steps on his liberty.

I SIT ON a couch in the front room and wonder how long it will be until they rush the mill. I'm not going to be much good unless I can stand on my feet. But maybe I won't have to stand up to fight them. They might try for me from the end of the mill where I

can see them coming; I slip the barrel of the Sharps across the window sill and sit waiting.

I expect someone has seen me moving around in here. A fellow a long way off lets go with a couple of shots. I don't know if it's a hundred yards or two hundred—it's a real good shot. I lie there back of the Sharps getting it trained in the middle of his powder-smoke, figuring how much an ounce ball will drop in spinning to yonder stump. I figure I'm going to be ready if he pops up with his head.

That's exactly what he's done when I least expected! It's Dick Brewer, I'd be willing to take a bet on it. I suppose he's trying to make up his mind if his long shots have got me. I pull down my sights in the middle of his forehead and try to hold them steady in front of my eyes. When I got him centered plumb in the middle I let him have it. The old Sharps roars. I can see through the smoke that I've blown off the top of his head.

It's sure been something. Maybe I couldn't do it again if I was stone sober and not racked by pain.

His buckaroos yonder are getting their horses. They've had enough. Plumb licked, and their bellies filled! I guess I've taught 'em not to meddle with a man's private ways or stick their noses into the right man's politics.

I can feel my life ebbing out fast now, but I'm still neutral. I guess I've showed them that much.

It's growing dark and I know I'm headed for the glory land. It'll be good to get shucked of this weight that's holding me down. Ten years hauling around buckshot is too long. I can see a great light coming to meet me. I give them my guns—them that's got the guts to use 'em from now on, and to fight ahead to liberty. I'm still awake when I turn to meet the light that's shining in my eyes. I reach out a hand—it's liberty, I figure—and then, somehow, I don't know anything more.

2 *Thrilling Novels* 2

DEATH RIDES MY SADDLE

by Ed Earl Repp

GOLDEN CIRCLE

by Roe Richmond

ACTION-PACKED WESTERN

Look for the January issue of

Luke Ward could walk out of jail scot-free if he hired out his gun to Macy; otherwise, that killing in self-defense would be a hanging matter. Only the price offered for another killing was too high . . .

DEEP GRAVEL GOLD

by Bryan Croghan

THERE HAD been a look of sly satisfaction in the marshal's cold gray eyes when he said, "Imbrie don't welcome gun-slingin' strangers. I'm lockin' you up, 'til I can check an' see if you're wanted by the law."

Rough-and-tumble living had trained Luke Ward to relax and rest at every opportunity: he sat on a sagging cot and grinned sourly to himself. Imbrie was one of several raw placer-mining towns in Idaho. He had expected trouble, else there would have been no reason for his coming; but he hadn't thought it would start when he stepped from the train, or that he would land in jail within a half-hour of his arrival.

Helping a pretty brown-haired girl from the train had touched it off. Anger roiled Luke anew. He had stopped to pick up the girl's luggage when a hulking ruffian shouldered him aside, nearly knocking him down. Hot words led to blows. The ruffian's gun was clearing leather when Luke drew and shot. There'd been no time for deliberate aiming; his bullet killed the brash intruder instantly. Such shooting affairs were as common as dust and mud, in towns like Imbrie, but the town marshal had arrested him for what was clearly an act of self-defense.

Luke Ward was young, with darkly sun-tanned face and a look of hard competence about his lean frame. He

scowled thoughtfully. There wasn't a chance that news of his coming had leaked; yet he was positive that something other than regard for the law backed the marshal's play.

Sound of a door being opened broke his run of thought. The marshal entered the jail, jerked a desk drawer open and pawed through a litter of papers. He was wiry, bony-faced, with a drooping black mustache. Studying him, Luke pegged him as a man who would kill ruthlessly and with little provocation.

Luke walked to the front of the cell. "Find my description on any of your dodgers?"

The marshal shook his head. "What's your name? An' where are you from?"

Pretending anger, Luke shook the cell door. "Never mind that; think you can keep me locked up forever for killing your ugly pal?"

"For a man in your fix, you've got a lot of gall!" the marshal said, his face reddening. "You're not greenhorn enough to think a court trial is the only way of handlin' you. But if you're smart, you can walk out of this jail, right now."

"Meaning what?" Luke asked.

"George Macy, manager for the mining syndicate, wants to hire a man who can use a gun."

Luke felt for cigaret makings, then remembered that he had used the last of his tobacco an hour ago. His being jailed was no longer a puzzle; it was clearly intended to crowd him into hiring out to Macy.

"What if I say no?" he asked.

"I'll let you figure that out, yourself," the marshal said.

The lawman was looking directly at Luke, but it was as if he stared at something beyond. Luke felt hairs stiffen on the back of his neck as he recalled a killer horse that had stared at him in that same way.

He took time to wonder how many men this cold-eyed marshal had butchered in Imbrie's jail, then said, "Guess you've got me cornered; turn me loose and I'll see Macy."

He buckled on his gunbelt and walked away from the jail, feeling thankful that he hadn't identified himself to the lawman.

Sauntering slowly, he came to a street corner, glanced back and saw the marshal following him. Then the marshal left the walk and angled across the street. *Going to tip Macy off that I'm coming,* Luke thought.

Scent of pine and fir filled his nostrils as a mountain breeze ran along the street. Luke breathed deeply, then again, and a little smile came to his lips. This was a man's country, and wresting gold from the earth was a man-sized job. He might do worse than settle down in Imbrie. A vine-covered home shared with a girl like the one he'd helped from the train—ah, there was a high-rolling thought! He smiled again; it was funny how a man's mind tangled with dreams that never came true.

HE WAS CROSSING the street when he saw the brown-haired girl. She had paused, watching him. As if suddenly realizing she had been staring, she hastily entered a general store.

Following her, Luke bought tobacco and papers and returned to the sidewalk.

Large letters on a window spelled: *Western Mining Syndicate.* Within a sparsely furnished reception room, Luke saw the words *District Manager* on a door and knocked. He heard quick footfalls, before a voice called, "Come in."

Sitting behind a desk, a large fat and pink-faced man turned a penetrating gaze on him. There was a steel safe in one corner, and Luke noticed that the door of another room was cracked slightly ajar.

His eyes came back to the pink-faced man. "You George Macy?" Re-

ceiving a nod for an answer, he said, "The marshal said you had a job for me."

Macy waved him to a straight-back chair. "Yes, he came in and told me about you." He turned a pencil with pudgy fingers. "I don't usually poke into another man's affairs, but Ed seems to think the law is looking for you."

Luke put a hard grin on his lips. "Would that bar me from the job?"

Macy smiled. "No; the law won't bother you here—if you work for me. Ed knows I need a man who isn't finicky."

Luke rolled a cigarette, lit it and inhaled. Now he was sure the crack had widened in that other doorway. "What's your proposition?" he asked.

"I want a man put away." The way Macy said it, he might have been talking of a ditch-digging job.

The blunt statement didn't surprise Luke. But he wanted to get the thing out in the open. "Mean you want him killed?"

"That's right."

"Mind if I ask why?"

Macy stiffened visibly. "That's my business!"

Flipping a hand indifferently, Luke asked, "How much will you pay?"

"A thousand dollars. One hundred now, and the balance when your work is done."

Luke stubbed out his cigarette. In a town like Imbrie, Macy could hire men who would kill for half that amount. Only an utter fool would fail to read a warning in that thought.

"Who's the man?"

"Will you take the job?" Macy shot back sharply.

"Yes."

"Good! You come here as soon as it gets dark. I'll name him then, and tell you anything else you'll need to know."

FIVE DOUBLE-EAGLES clinked in Luke's pocket and he was smiling bleakly when he closed the outer door. He stood there, staring at impassable cliffs that walled the river's far shore and wondering how they planned to frame him, after the killing.

He waited ten seconds longer, then palmed the door open. His lip lifted crookedly when he heard voices in the manager's office. He crossed over and jerked that door open.

The marshal came off the straight-back in one fast move. Macy started to push up, then dropped back without taking his hands from the desk top.

"What brought you back?" he blurted.

"Just wanted to see who was spying on me," Luke said mildly; "you and the marshal in this deal together?"

"Yes, dammit!" Macy snapped. "Now get out! I don't want too many people seeing you around this office!"

Luke grinned wickedly. "I'll go, but I don't trust this tail-wagging dog of yours as far's I can spit. A man who double-crosses the people who hire him will double-cross anyone else."

Edging through the doorway he shoved the door shut, half expecting it would be punctured by bullets. He crossed to the outer door, hearing Macy exclaim, "No, dammit! We need him!" and knowing that the marshal had wanted to follow him for a shootout.

If Macy fought him, it would be in some devious, unexpected manner. But the marshal would be as unafraid as a silver-tip grizzly—and just as dangerous. Sunk in thought, Luke nearly collided with the brown-haired girl as she came out of the store.

He tipped his hat and apologized, would have passed on, but saw she hesitated, smiling.

The smile, and the look in her eyes, brought an answering smile to his lips. He said, "Maybe we should get acquainted; my name's Luke Ward."

"I'm Judy McCall," she said. "I came west to keep house for my uncle and my brother. She shifted packages

on a dimpled arm. "You going to stay long in Imbrie?"

"I don't know," Luke hedged. Married to a girl like her, he could be happy anywhere. But guns and violence were the tools of his trade, barring him from marriage.

"Why don't you tell me to mind my own affairs?" she asked contritely.

"It was a poor answer," he admitted, "but it'll have to do for a while; maybe, by then, I can think up a better one."

The look in his eyes hinted at what that answer might be, and she blushed and dropped her gaze. "My men folks will be hungry when they come home. I must get back and start supper."

LUKE WATCHED her going. Then, her words reminding of his own empty stomach, he found a restaurant. He had given his order and was waiting when two men came in and dropped on stools beside him. One was big, black-bearded. The other was tall, sandy and blue-eyed.

The big man ordered coffee for two. When they had been served, he said quietly, "I'm a miner. Name's Dan Fraser. This man is Alex McCall, uncle of the girl who got off the train with you. Us miners decided that anybody who could outshoot one of George Macy's gunnies might help us."

"How?" Luke asked.

Fraser's deep-set eyes sparked anger. "Three miners have been killed here, lately. The rest of us can't prove anything, but we can guess who did it, an' why. Macy said they owed the syndicate, an' he took over their claims."

Luke's attention sharpened. There'd been no mention of those claims in Macy's reports. "What's the marshal's name?" he asked.

"Ed Strang."

"How many others are in with Macy?"

"Your killin' Gus Pival left two, Matt Gunther an' Dutch Yarbo."

Rolling a smoke gave Luke time for thinking. The odds would be four to one. Any of them would take pleasure in backshooting him, if they learned his errand in Imbrie.

"You know how it went with you," Fraser said. "The county seat's forty miles away. They turned you loose, but they won't let you get away with killin' Pival. None of us miners are fast with guns. We'd like havin' you on our side."

"And if I do help you?" Luke asked curiously.

"If this fracas pans out right," Fraser said earnestly, "we'll see you get the claims Macy stole."

Although having no notion of accepting the offered pay, Luke was impressed. According to advance information he had, Imbrie claims were not being sold for pennies. "What's your plan?"

Rueful grins met his question. "We ain't got one," Fraser admitted. "We've talked of gaugin' 'em, but that'd mean a bunch of us'd get killed; an' the rest might be outlawed an' lose their claims."

Luke inhaled and blew out smoke. There was dry amusement in his eyes when he said, "I've already hired out to Macy."

McCall sputtered and coughed, choking on hastily swallowed coffee.

Fraser swore bleakly. "Mean to say you're fool enough to work for them?"

Luke smiled. "I got out of jail by promising to see Macy, and I had a good reason for taking his job. But don't worry; I'm on your side."

The miners eyed Luke carefully, measuring him. "We'll follow your lead," Fraser said finally. "Any time you need help, let us know."

McCall drained his cup, stood up and put a big-knuckled hand on Luke's shoulder. "Judy thinks you're all right; I'll back her judgment."

Surprised and pleased, Luke smiled again. Praise for anything other than

his skill with a gun was a rare thing. Coming from Judy made it doubly welcome. He was still smiling when the waitress brought his meal.

HE LEFT the restaurant a half-hour later and moved along the street, pausing before the *Mint Bar*. If a man sought information on local happenings, he'd likely find it in a saloon.

A paunchy, battle-scarred man polished glasses behind the mahogany slab. A dark-garbed man sat at a table spreading cards for solitaire. Otherwise, the place seemed empty. Luke stepped to the table, took a chair and began rolling a smoke.

The player riffled cards suggestively. "Care for a little game?" He shrugged when Luke shook his head, then straightened, curiosity brightening his black eyes. "You a placer man?"

"You might say so," Luke said; "my father taught me all the tricks of placering."

The cards whirred smoothly. "My name's Floyd Parker. I get around a lot; seems I've seen you before."

Luke knew Parker, had recognized him at sight; and he knew that Parker was rated as a square-shooting gambler. Time had changed his own appearance, and it pleased him that the gambler hadn't known him.

"I get around too," he said, smiling. "I've been in Alaska and Africa. Maybe you—"

The batwing doors swung abruptly and two men tramped noisily in.

Looking more ape-like than human, one of them had a shambling shape and a wide flat face. Red-brown eyes crowded a flattened nose. The hard-cases ordered whiskey and the red-eyed one cut a sideways glance at Luke.

Resting a foot on the bar rail, his companion stared truculently. He was tall, built solidly, with high cheek bones and a ropy mustache which made his sullen face seem longer. He nudged Red Eyes with his elbow and asked, "That the dirty son who killed Gus?"

Red Eyes nodded, without taking his stare from Luke.

The barman said earnestly, "Now lissen, Yarbo! Don't you an' Gunther start another ruckus! I still ain't paid out on your last one!"

"Don't worry," Yarbo sneered. "This coyote looks like he's built more for runnin' than for fightin'."

Luke stood up, knowing no way out of this, and not seeking one. These uglies were out for blood. Either they hadn't learned of his talk with Macy, or they were letting a personal grudge override that knowledge.

Yarbo came to meet him, disregarding protests from the barman. Luke's left mashed Yarbo's nose and Yarbo hit him in the belly, driving him back. Swinging with both fists, Yarbo bored in, trying to beat Luke down with his greater weight. Luke weaved aside and brought his right across in a vicious blow against Yarbo's jaw, then followed with another to his neck. Yarbo tangled his feet and slammed head-first against the wall.

A clubbing blow on the back of his own head drove Luke to hands and knees and sent stars dancing before his eyes. He scuttled aside, fearing a disabling kick and knowing that Matt Gunther had bought into the fight.

He jerked his face away from the savage swing of a booted foot; then his hands caught and twisted the foot as he lunged up. Gunther fell; he screamed with pain and jerked loose. The kick Luke landed on his jaw flattened him, quivering, on the floor.

Yarbo stood with his broad back braced against the wall. He started to move, then his mouth sagged, half open. "I know you!" he said. "You're Grizzly Ward's cub! An' you're a spy for Western Syndicate!" Fear and baffled indecision spread in his eyes, and he broke and ran from the saloon.

THE BARMAN rolled Gunther over and slopped water on his face.

Parker said, "I like fair play, and I was going to help you. But you didn't need help." He snapped his fingers impatiently. "I thought I had a memory for faces! Sure, I remember you now. But I didn't 'til that surly brute called your name. Grizzly Ward was the first man to think of hydraulicing deep gravel; you were only a kid when I saw you with him in California."

Luke's head was still ringing. He walked to the doorway, in time to see Yarbo make a fast entry into the syndicate building. He touched a rising lump on his head carefully. It seemed Yarbo got around a lot, also. Now the fat was in the fire; if Macy had any incriminating records, he'd destroy them.

Gunther stood up and staggered, glassy-eyed, to the front. Luke moved aside and the dazed man headed across the street, wavering legs carrying him into the *Buckhorn Bar*.

Parker joined Luke. "If it's any of my business," he said, "why did you come to Imbrie?"

Luke jerked his head toward the street. Yarbo had called him a spy, a name he didn't like; he preferred being called a trouble-shooter. His having been indentified put an end to secrecy and he felt a need for talking. But caution was a habit not easily discarded.

They were beyond ear-shot of the barman when he said, "Returns from Macy's dredging operation began dropping, several months ago. Macy claims gravel he's been working is leaner, but Western's geologist won't buy that. Martin Ballentine, Western's president, sent me to look into things."

He rubbed tingling knuckles thoughtfully. Now he could guess why Macy wanted a man killed. The syndicate inspector was due at Imbrie tomorrow. The inspector's visit was routine, with Macy knowing the date in advance. Someone knew and would tell that they were high-grading gold; and they were pressed for time.

If they had wanted to use him as a scapegoat for murder, the man must still be alive. He left Parker abruptly and moved to a street corner. The sun had set and miners crowded the walks.

Two buckboards loaded with muck-spattered men came into town. One stopped in front of the syndicate office. A husky, young-looking man climbed out and carried a canvas bag into the building. Although Luke stood there until he had smoked a cigarette short, he did not see the young man come out.

Fraser waded street dust and came to him. "Heard about your fight." he said. "Have you learned anything?"

Luke told what Macy had said, adding his own notion regarding the manager's motive.

The big miner swore luridly. "Then maybe it's Bob McCall they wanted you to kill!"

"Is he Judy's brother?"

"Yes. He takes care of the gold clean-up; brings the gold to Macy's office, weighs it, an' locks it in the safe."

Luke thought of the young man who had gone into the syndicate office. "I'll do some prowling," he said, "see what I can find."

Fraser's beard bristled. "I'll go right along with you!"

"No!" Luke said sharply. "You keep out of it for a while. You promised me a free hand, remember?"

The big miner's eyes held a half angry look. "I did promise that," he admitted, "but I said we'd help you. Hell, man, you can't buck 'em all!"

"Don't worry about me," Luke told him. "And if I think it means Bob's life, I'll call for help."

He left Fraser and went on until he came to an alley. The alley brought him to a door at the rear of the syndicate building.

Luke was about to try the knob

when it turned. His gun was out and cocked when the door was opened by Matt Gunther. There was a wild look in Gunther's eyes and he was holding a gun, with thumb poised to fan the hammer. In the brief moment required for that action lay his only chance, Luke knew.

Reports of two guns sounded almost as one. A thunderbolt stroked Luke's head and darkness took him.

HE CAME to, knowing he was being carried like a sack of wheat across a man's shoulder. Then he was lowered and carried into a house. Looking up, he saw Fraser's bearded face.

The miner eased him onto a chair steadied by Judy McCall. "I thought you was a goner, for sure," he said. Alex McCall was there, and Luke guessed he was in the McCall home.

"I promised not to interfere," Fraser said, "but I worried an' tailed along after you. I heard shots an' got there ahead of anyone else. Gunther was dead; I grabbed you an' scrammed."

Judy brought water and towels, then washed and bandaged a furrow in his scalp. Her nearness, and the touch of her small hands, set his heart to thudding.

He related his adventure and said, "Gunther must have used the alley to get away from the Buckhorn."

McCall looked at his watch. "Wonder what's keepin' Bob?" It's way past time for him to come home."

Luke traded looks with Fraser. "I'm going to get into that building," he said. "But I won't try it without your help. Here's what I want you to do..."

Fraser heard him out and shook his head. "Alex can get some of the boys an' handle that. I'll go with you."

There was a crisp edge of command in Luke's reply. "I draw pay for doing this job. Do as I say, and start it rolling as soon as you get down town."

Tears wet Judy's eyes. She caught his hands and said, "Don't let them hurt you again!"

Luke fought an impulse to take her in his arms. Time might be running out for her brother. "I'll be careful," he said, and followed Fraser and McCall into gathering dusk.

The wound on his head throbbed dully when he came again to the rear of the syndicate building, and he had an uneasy feeling that he had forgotten something. Coming suddenly from the main street, the sound of shattering glass mingled with yells and the blasting of guns. He grinned thinly when boots pounded within the building. The front door opened and slammed shut.

He used his gun, breaking glass from a window. Without waiting to learn if the racket he made had caused an alarm, he climbed in.

The room was half-filled with old furniture. He moved into a hallway. Another room held a cot and a washstand. The next door was locked. He was using one eye at its keyhole when the front door opened.

Luke was in the room that held the stored furniture, had the door cracked narrowly, when footsteps sounded in the office. Macy came into the hall and went to the locked door. He used a key and went inside. Light flared and glass tinked as he lit a lamp.

Coming out on tiptoes, Luke heard him say, "Better change your mind about squealing on us, Bob. All the gold we've taken is under the floor of this room; your cut will be more than you can make in ten years, working for the syndicate."

Evidently receiving a negative answer, he said coldly, "There's only one way to handle a conscientious fool like you!" The words covered Luke's approach.

Bob McCall was spread-eagled on an iron bedstead. He squirmed and made angry sounds behind the cloth that gagged his mouth.

Macy stood by a washstand, near

the bed. He canted his head, listening to another burst of noise. Then his hand went under his coatfront and came out holding a small revolver. Bob stiffened, blue eyes staring at the gun.

LUKE LEAPED, swinging his Colt. Perhaps the manager read warning in Bob's eyes; he dodged and whirled. The gunbarrel missed his head but struck his hand, driving the small weapon from his grasp.

Macy lunged sideways. A water pitcher hurled by his other hand struck Luke's face, jolting him back and half blinding him. He felt the impact of Macy's fist against the side of his neck. Then the manager darted through the doorway.

The office door was closing when Luke reached the hallway. Fanning the hammer, he drove three bullets through it, heard the outer door slam, and turned back to the bed. Using a pocket knife, he freed Bob and cut away the gag.

Bob sat up and cleared his mouth of spit. "Your name Luke Ward?"

"Yes."

"Strang and Macy got the drop on me and tied me up. Yarbo came in and told about you. Then someone killed Matt Gunther, and Strang and Yarbo went hunting for you."

They dragged the bed aside. Several floor boards showed signs of having been moved recently. Furious at himself for allowing Macy to escape, Luke said, "The gold will keep. Let's go!"

Outside, a group of miners watched from across the street. "Tell those men to watch this building, front and back," he said. "And stick with them."

"Hold on!" Bob said. "I heard Yarbo say you're poison with a gun, but you'll need help."

"No," Luke said bluntly.

He turned and went, striding rapidly downtown, and aware of a rising tide of dissatisfaction. Stubborn pride kept him from accepting aid from men like Fraser and Bob McCall. That pride robbed him of friends and would land him in a boothill grave, unless he changed his way of life.

His head was aching fiercely now, and the bell that warned of something forgotten rang louder in his mind.

A thick expectant silence met him in the *Mint Saloon.* Men stood or sat motionless, staring at him. Strang and Yarbo were standing near a Yukon stove. Fraser and Alex McCall were there, and he saw Parker come erect at a poker table and move toward him.

Luke was within ten feet of Strang and Yarbo when he said, "Everyone clear out—unless you want to chance being shot!"

Five seconds of dead silence passed, before the faro look-out man led a rush for the front door. Others followed the barman out the back way. Strang and Yarbo traded glances and moved apart.

Parker asked, "What did you find out?"

Luke flicked a glance at the dark back doorway, then pinned his gaze on Strang. "Macy and these wolves were high-grading. Bob found it out, would have told the inspector. Macy was set to kill him when I butted in."

"Where do you stand, Parker?" Strang asked.

"I'm buying in with Luke," the gambler said flatly.

Strang's fingers brushed his gun butt. He made no answer to Luke's charge, and Luke sensed a stubborn pride that matched his own. Sweat glistened on Yarbo's face and he shifted his feet as if wanting to run. But Strang's nerve would not break; that was made plain by his bony face, on which neither fear, nor any other emotion showed.

The marshal met his look with a thrusting stare. *It's coming now,* Luke thought, knowing he'd get no warning from those cold eyes and putting a concentrated watch on Strang's gun hand.

THE HAND moved, blurring to the gun and coming up with it. Fast as that move was, Luke's draw shaded it. His slug caught Strang in the breast, driving him back against the cold stove and causing his bullet to go wild.

Yarbo gave a whimpering grunt and clawed frantically for his gun. It was out and leveling when Parker's derringer barked twice. Blood jumped from a hole in Yarbo's throat and another hole centered his forehead. His fall shook the floor.

Strang was dying on his feet, but his gun was coming up. Luke's gun hammer clicked, and clicked again, before brutal realization came. Now he knew what he had forgotten to do! He had not reloaded after killing Gunther and shooting at Macy, and he never carried a load under the hammer. Nor would help come from Parker, whose weapon was also empty. Guessing that his head wound had scrambled his thinking was useless. No excuse would save him now.

Staring with a kind of horrible fascination, he saw Strang's finger tighten, taking up trigger slack.

A man less tough-fibered than the marshal would have been dead before now; and death caught up with him during that split-second. He fell suddenly, like a hammer-killed steer. The gun blasted, driving a slug into the floor.

Breath hissed across Luke's teeth in a gasp of pure relief. But even during the stress of that deadly action, a corner of his mind had been wondering about Macy. He made a diving lunge and scooped up the fallen gun. Luck might allow a man to make one blunder and live, but no more.

While still in a crouch, he threw a shot at glinting metal in the shadowy back doorway, and watched George Macy spin into the light and drop a double-barreled shotgun. Shock of falling released cocked hammers and a hail of buckshot riddled spittoons along the bar.

"That was close!" Parker breathed. "Too damned close!"

Macy sat in a pool of blood that ran from a shattered thigh. Luke stared at Strang. A tough hard man, he had lived and died according to his own code of bravery.

Parker went behind the bar and poured a shot of whiskey. "Put this down," he said. "I can use one, myself; that shotgun gave me the creeps!"

Fraser shook Luke's hand and thumped his back. A crowd swarmed the saloon, but he had eyes only for Judy, who came in with Bob.

"You're not hurt?" she asked.

"No more than I was," he said, smiling.

"What will you do now?"

Luke hesitated, watching grim-faced miners carry Macy outside. Reaction from excitement had increased his former feeling of dissatisfaction. "I don't know," he said.

Parker caught that reply. "Well, I do!" he snapped. "I know something about luck and percentages; you'll never be so lucky again. Your placering experience will land you the job Macy had." His black eyes twinkled. "And, unless I miss my guess, you've already won something worth more than all the gold at Imbrie!"

A blush spread on Judy's cheeks, but her eyes held on his. "I want you to stay," she whispered.

Luke took a deep breath. He was sick of grim and bloody affairs like the one he had just gone through. And sick of meeting only strangers who cared nothing for him.

A smile broke across his face. He could accept the claims offered by Fraser with a clear conscience. Adding them and a peaceful job to thoughts of a home with Judy, he could see no reason for leaving Imbrie. None whatever.

★

Ringabaugh had the fortune he'd spent his life making on the owlhoot trails, and he wasn't going to lose the money now. Not even if his son had to be sacrificed...

RENEGADE RECKONING

by Jim Brewer

UP THE side of the timbered mountain he fled, through the icy length of the pass, and down into the level of the valley. He wore out two horses in the doing, changing them at the expense of an unwary rancher as he could, and the stride of the mustang he now rode had begun to falter. But on his backtrail were two men who meant to have the small fortune he carried in his saddlebags.

Ringabaugh was an old man and his muscles and senses cried for rest. But he had spent his life scheming, stealing, and double-crossing for the money, and he didn't mean to lose it. An indomitable will carried him on, and his wily brain was even now evolving a plan for ridding himself of the pursuers.

Ringabaugh had served twenty years in Yuma hellhole with the secret hiding place of the loot his wild bunch had accumulated locked in his brain. Upon his release, knowing that he would be followed by other lobos, he had taken pains to lose his pursuers. But the three men had been too clever for him and surprised him as he was preparing to flee with the money. He

had killed one of the three in an exchange of bullets, and considered himself lucky to escape the trap with the other two on his heels.

The town came into view before him now, and he stopped by a stream to clean the accumulated dirt from himself and the horse. The years had taught him the importance of appearance, and the success of his plan depended upon his being accepted at face value. Afterward, he rode into the town at the same hard pace, as though he had lost no time in getting there.

He rode directly to the marshal's office, slid from the saddle, and hurried into the building. The office was deserted, and he went back out, stopping on the sidewalk. His haste had attracted attention, and a shopkeeper came running toward him. "What's the matter, stranger?"

"Where's the marshal?" Ringabaugh asked hurriedly.

"I just saw him go into the saloon." The shopkeeper pointed to a building with a high, false front, and without another word, Ringabaugh moved toward it. The interrogator and two others, attracted by the excitement, followed.

Ringabaugh burst through the batwing doors and hurried toward the tall, young man with the badge on his vest at the far end of the bar. Most of the customers in the saloon followed the men at his back, so that he led a small crowd to the lawman.

"Marshal!" he cried loudly. "There's going to be—"

But the lawman held up his hand, silencing Ringabaugh. "Hold it!" he said. "There's no sense in getting everybody worked up; why don't you come over to the office and tell me your story, privately."

"All right!" he said to the crowd. "There's nothing to get excited about. Go on about your business and let me worry about this."

Apparently the lawman was held in respect, for the crowd began to drift away, and someone said, "All right, Tom," in a friendly voice.

But Ringabaugh watched in dissatisfaction. It had been his intention to have his pursuers ride into an armed trap, and now he wondered if he could convince this perceptive young man enough to get him to carry out his wish. Ringabaugh held a strong hole card, however, and he would play it if necessary.

He studied the marshal, for the boy was his son. Ringabaugh had married once and after living with his wife for a few months, deserted her to care for herself. He had heard through the "rustling of the leaves" along the outlaw trail that his wife had given birth to a son and had followed in a careless way occasional news of the boy's growth. He had learned while in prison of the death of his wife and later heard that the boy had become marshal of this town.

AFTER the crowd had dispersed, the lawman led the way across the street and into his office. Ringabaugh followed and took the seat across the desk.

"Now," the marshal said, "what's this news of yours?"

"I was coming through Faro," Ringabaugh named a town through which he actually had come, "and I spent the night there. I'd left my horse in the livery and when I went to saddle him the next morning, I heard voices in the next stall. I didn't pay much attention at first, but after I got the drift of the conversation, I hid in the corner and listened. There were two men and they plan to rob the bank here. I didn't catch enough of the talk to learn the details, but when they went out I got a good look at them. They were Charlie Foster and Latigo Lewis!"

The lawman had been studying Ringabaugh as he talked. Now he said, "Why didn't you tell the marshal in

Faro? There's a reward on those men and he'd have been delighted at the chance of collecting it."

The boy was smart and he didn't get rattled. Despite himself, a small feeling of pride went through Ringabaugh. "I went to the marshal's office," the ex-convict said glibly, "but they told me he was out after a horse-thief. By that time the outlaws had left town, and the only thing I could do was ride over here and warn you."

"I see." The marshal drummed his fingers on the desk. "I'm obliged, Mr— What did you say your name was?"

"My name is Oscar Files, Marshal." Ringabaugh lied. "I'm on my way to California to see my brother; he's bought a spread there and wants me to work for him."

The lawman looked down at the desk and Ringabaugh studied him speculatively. He had to be certain the marshal would believe the story and take care of his pursuers for him. If he was not sure, he would reveal his true identity and call on the boy's filial sense of duty to help him make a stand. Though he didn't like to make himself known, he felt certain that the blood tie would be strong enough to make the boy overlook his behavior.

The lawman looked up at him. "Thank you for going out of your way, Mr. Files. If Foster and Lewis show up, I'll be waiting for them."

Ringabaugh sat back, a sense of triumph and satisfaction sweeping through him. But a frown marred his face. "*You'll* be waiting for them! You've got a whole town to deputize to help you."

The boy smiled. "I know, but these people hire *me* to protect them. This is my job, not theirs."

"You mean, you'll call them alone."

"I'll have a couple men covering me when I ask them to surrender," the marshal said.

Charlie and Latigo were too old and had too much at stake to surrender. They would fight, and though the aroused town would finish them, the marshal would be their first target.

"But you'll get killed!" Ringabaugh exclaimed.

The boy shrugged. "I'll take my chances. We can't just throw down on them; they will have a chance to surrender and it's my job to give it to them." He rose. "But that's my worry and not yours, Mr. Files. Thanks again for your information."

Ringabaugh rose and went to the door. After all, it was the boy's job, why should he worry? All his life he'd worked in his own way for the money in his saddlebags, and now that he had it, his only worry was going to be on how to spend the loot.

RINGABAUGH took his horse to the livery and carried the saddlebags to the hotel where he registered for a room. In the room he washed from a pitcher, then went to a restaurant for supper.

After he had ordered, he allowed

himself the luxury of relaxing and contemplating his movements since his release from prison. He was well satisfied with the way things had worked out. He had deliberately aimed for this town after he'd broken out of the trap the others had set for him, knowing that he stood more of a chance in the town that employed Tom as peace officer. Besides, he'd been curious to see his son. Now, he could eat a good meal, have a drink or two, and get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow morning he could pull out without arousing any suspicion, and he would be free and rich.

He let his mind rest on the youngster as he ate, finding himself attracted to the boy. He'd had too many other things to worry about during the course of his life to concern himself with his family; now he wished he'd taken a little time to teach his son a bit of what he had learned.

This business of giving Charlie Foster and Latigo Lewis a chance to surrender was a good way of getting yourself killed. The only person who mattered was yourself; to hell with everyone and everything else. That had been Ringabaugh's philosophy and now he had a fortune and no worry except how to spend it.

The boy was too much like his mother. She'd have given Foster and Lewis a chance to surrender. Of course, Tom had grown up with her and been exposed to her teaching all his life. But by now, he should be able to think for himself...

To hell with it! Ringabaugh had followed his own way of life too long to worry about someone else.

After the meal he bought a cigar, lighted it, and sauntered casually into the street. Dusk had fallen, and already the sounds of activity in the saloons filled the evening. Ringbaugh grinned. This was the first opportunity he'd had in twenty years to do as he wanted, and he let the intoxication of the freedom seep into his mind.

He moved along the street and into a saloon. He bellied up to the bar and ordered a drink. A barkeep placed a bottle and glass before him and he filled the glass and toyed with it, watching the activity around him.

He noted particularly two punchers who were out to paint the town. One fancied himself a tough, and as the liquor he was drinking began taking its effect, looked about for a fight.

A DRUMMER in a derby hat stood near, and the cowboy reached over and jerked the hat over the man's ears and eyes. The drummer struggled to lift the derby free and the puncher roared with laughter. With an angry effort, the salesman suddenly pulled the hat from his head and drew a revolver from a shoulder holster. But as he aimed it, the cowboy swung a solid blow to his face, piling him backward and making the gun explode harmlessly into the air.

The drummer fell to the floor unconscious, and a silence descended over the saloon. In the quiet, the batwing doors swung open and the marshal came into the room. He took in the situation at a glance and spoke to the cowboy. "You better come with me, Pecos."

But Pecos, elated over his easy victory over the drummer, snarled at the lawman. "Come and get me, Marshal!"

The peace officer studied the cowboy a moment, then started forward. Pecos yelled with delight and launched himself into a dive at the lawman. He caught the marshal about the middle and the two of them fell to the floor in a fist-flying tangle. For several moments they struggled, then the peace officer landed a blow that stunned Pecos.

The puncher fell back and the lawman got to his feet and stepped backward to allow Pecos to get to his feet. But as he did so, Pecos' companion grasped a bottle by the neck and made for the marshal's unprotected back.

Without thinking, Ringabaugh's hand fell to his holster and he was aiming his sixgun at the cowboy. "Drop it!" he snarled.

The bottle fell from the puncher's hand and smashed on the floor.

"Let's keep it even," Ringabaugh said softly.

Pecos sat up and shook his head. As he realized what had happened, he roared with rage and leaped to his feet. The marshal moved forward and the two men stood toe-to-toe, swapping sledge hammer blows. Then Pecos was on the floor again.

"Had enough?" the lawman asked.

Pecos rolled over and raised his head. Blood smeared his face, but his eyes were unconquered. He sprang to his feet.

The marshal waited. Pecos' arms windmilled as he charged and the lawman fended him off, stepping in whenever the opportunity presented itself to wring a grunt from his opponent. Now, Pecos' breathing became harder, and he circled desperately, trying for a winning punch. But the peace officer kept warily away from him, keeping telling blows into Pecos' body and face. Finally, Pecos dropped his guard and fell wearily across the bar. "I'm done," he gasped.

The lawman turned on the second cowboy. "How about you? You can take your turn now!"

But the puncher looked away from the marshal's angry gaze. "No," he mumbled, in an ashamed voice.

"Then come on," the peace officer said. Resignedly, the two men headed out the batwing doors followed by the marshal.

There was a silence following the departure of the men. Then one of the men in the saloon said, "We got us the fightenest, squarest-shooting marshal in the West!"

There were murmurs of assent from the assemblage, and Ringabaugh felt a curious pride. That was *his* son they were talking about! And, he admitted

to himself, he liked the way Tom had handled the situation. He downed the whiskey in his glass and suddenly felt very good.

SEVERAL drinks later he was thinking about going to bed when the marshal walked into the room and came over to him. "I want to thank you for keeping that second fellow off my back," he said. "That's twice I'm indebted to you."

"Forget it," Ringabaugh said, embarrassed.

"I'd like to do something to show my appreciation," the lawman went on. "Perhaps I can—"

"I don't want any special consideration!" Ringabaugh interrupted.

For several long moments the marshal studied the older man. "It's only right that I split the reward for Foster and Lewis with you. If you'll give me your address, I'll send the money as soon as I get it."

Ringabaugh didn't like the conversation; he wasn't used to people thank-

ing him, and his inadequacy at not knowing how to hold up his end of the conversation angered him. He sniffed contemptuously. Fighting Charlie and Latigo was not going to be a barroom brawl. They were seasoned outlaws and more than a match for an inexperienced marshal. The odds were a hundred to one against his collecting anything other than a number of slugs through his guts.

"Have you got a girl?" he asked suddenly.

The lawman looked at him perplexedly. "Yes," he said hesitantly. "Sue Carson. She works in the millinery shop; we're going to get married in the summer. Why?"

"Give her my share of the reward money for a wedding present," Ringabaugh said harshly. Without waiting to see the effect of his words, he turned and left the saloon.

Outside in the darkness, he made his way along the plank sidewalk. Damn fool kid! he thought angrily. The son-of-a-gun wanted to split the reward money with him! He shook his head. What kind of fool reasoning was that?

The night was cool and Ringabaugh was tired. He made his way to his hotel room and got into bed. But sleep wouldn't come and he found himself thinking of Tom.

Hell! he must be getting soft in his old age. That was what he got for allowing personal feelings to interfere with his plans. He'd fought and schemed all his life for the position in which he now found himself, and he was damned if he was going to let anything spoil it for him. Let the kid make his own way and learn as he, Ringabaugh, had learned. The boy was young and had plenty of time. Ringabaugh's time was running out and he had to make the most of what was left.

So dismissing the subject, Ringabaugh tried to force himself to sleep. But sleep was slow in coming, and when it came was troubled and restless.

He woke early and again reviewed the events of the previous day. Satisfied, he determined to slip out of town as soon as possible. He paid his bill to a sleepy clerk and made his way to the livery stable. He saddled and led his mount to the door of the barn.

He paused within the barn and scanned the trail along which he had come. His only fear now was that his pursuers might come upon him riding away; but a careful scrutiny convinced him that they were not yet near enough to observe any activity within the town. He swung aboard his mustang and spurred the animal away from the settlement.

It was a warm, Spring morning with a rising sun beginning to warm the chill left by the night. Birds were singing and flying happily about and the foliage was assuming the green mantle of the season. The feel of the freedom he hadn't known for such a long time made the blood race in Ringabaugh's veins, but strangely, he didn't feel the happiness he had anticipated. A peculiar mood of depression seemed to haunt him.

He turned into the first wood to screen himself from any observer. After a time he came into a small meadow. The town lay below him, clearly visible in the sunny morning. He dismounted to breathe the horse and made himself a cigaret.

He squatted on his heels while he smoked the cigaret, watching the town with a contemplative frown. If Tom survived the fight with the outlaws, he would lead what Ringabaugh had always sneeringly referred to as a useful life. True, he might never be a great man, but he would marry and raise children to succeed him and he would be held in respect by his neighbors.

Ringabaugh had always scorned that life because he couldn't understand how anyone could be happy eking out a living. He'd always been trying to make a fortune with that fortune always just beyond his reach.

He'd always had to try a little harder to get it. In his efforts, he'd lied and cheated and lost his self respect and his friends. And his life had been a continuing series of failures and disappointments.

He threw the end of the cigaret away and rose to remount. As he did so, his eyes fell on his bedroll.

HE STARED, puzzled. His outfit had consisted of an old canvas groundcloth and a worn blanket. Now he saw lashed to his saddle a new tarpaulin and two new blankets.

Suddenly he knew, instinctively, that the bedroll was a gift from his son. Tom had given it to him because Ringabaugh had refused a share of the reward money. In his hurry to saddle up and get out of the town, Ringabaugh had overlooked the difference earlier in the morning.

There was a peculiar choked feeling in Ringabaugh's throat, and his eyes filled with tears. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had given him anything; and the bedroll was a gift from his son!

For as much as fifteen minutes, Ringabaugh could only stare at the bedroll. Then, suddenly, he swung aboard his mustang and spurred the animal back along the trail.

His conscious mind could not function; it was in a peculiar state of shock. But he realized that he had no time to lose. When he came to the town he circled it, keeping to an arroyo to stay out of sight.

On the other side of the settlement, he found a spot among some boulders that surveyed the way to the town. He loosened the saddle on the mustang and hobbled it in a motte of cottonwoods away from the trail. He drew the carbine from the saddle scabbard, and returning to the rocks, settled down to wait.

An hour passed; with Ringabaugh sitting trance-like behind his boulder. The sun rose higher into the heavens, beading his face and body with sweat, but the ex-convict paid no attention to the discomfort. Then he saw the two specks moving slowly along the trail to the town, and when they came close enough recognized Charlie Foster and Latigo Lewis.

Charlie was slightly in the lead, and Ringabaugh lined his sights on the man's thick shoulders. He waited until they were almost upon him, then squeezed the trigger.

The flat report of the rifle sounded like a cannon roar in the quiet of the prairie. Foster spun backward from the horse and hit the ground, flopped limply as though he were a scarecrow made of rags and sawdust.

Ringabaugh quickly ejected the shell and swung his weapon to bead it on Latigo. But the slat-thin pursuer had left the saddle with the first shot and scuttled out of sight into a draw.

Ringabaugh cursed and glanced behind him at the town. His shot would bring the marshal, and Ringabaugh was afraid of what questions would bring. He wanted to be gone when the townsmen arrived on the scene.

He tried to get a better view of the draw into which Latigo had gone and a bullet whined by his nose. The explosion and the puff of smoke told him that the outlaw was attempting to work his way around and outflank Ringabaugh.

THE EX-CONVICT knew that he could not stay where he was. His glance took in Latigo's probable objective, and he slid out of his concealment, trying to work his way to another boulder which would outflank his opponent.

The tang of powdersmoke filled the air, and the silence tightened Ringabaugh's nerves. He lay prone and inched himself forward, attempting to move without noise. But he knew he had little time, and in his haste his foot struck two rocks together with an audible sound.

He froze, wondering if Latigo had heard. For several long moments he lay still, listening for his opponent. But he heard nothing and had begun to move forward again when a slight sound behind him jarred his senses.

He rolled quickly as a carbine roared and a great blow struck his chest. Latigo was standing behind him, a leer of triumph on his thin face.

Instinctively, Ringabaugh triggered and the outlaw seemed to rise forward a little, then topple and lay without moving.

Ringabaugh fell back and it seemed as though a great weight were pressing on his chest. He had to struggle to get his breath and through pain-fogged eyes he watched the red blood spill from his shirt.

For what seemed eternity he lay there before he heard the drumming of the horses. Presently the riders pulled to a halt and swung down. A figure he dimly recognized as his son went from one to the other of the dead bodies, then came to kneel by Ringabaugh's side.

He studied the ex-convict a moment, then asked, "Who are you, oldtimer?"

Ringabaugh considered the question; suddenly the most important thing in the world was to have this boy know that he, Ringabaugh, was his father. But he remembered how he'd deserted the boy and his mother and of how he'd placed Tom's life in jeopardy with his scheme to free himself of Charlie and Latigo. And he knew that even now he couldn't look his son in the face and tell him.

"I'm just a drifter," he said. He smiled a little, then the black mantle of death dropped around him.

★

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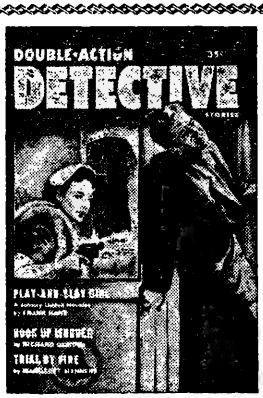

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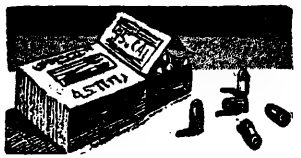

Pablo Roja was a terror, so long as he believed he had a powerful relic of the mighty Cochise...

THE MAGIC GUNBELT

by A. A. Baker

A TEAMSTER, seated in the deep shade of *Brion's Saloon,* turned to watch Pablo Roja ride a lathered horse up to the hitching rack. "Just keep goin', Mex," he said. "This is a gringo's saloon."

The teamster's companions guffawed, not noting the shine on Pablo's worn gun barrel, not taking the time to eye the slippery look of the black leather holster. Encouraged, the teamster added, "Fancy riggin' on that gunbelt, Mex."

Pablo gave the men a long look before he spoke. "It is of the white man's hair and braided into the gunbelt by the wife of Cochise." He rubbed stubby fingers along the smooth basket weave of vari-colored hair, punctured through tiny holes in the wide leather backing.

"Yeah, I'll bet!" The teamster's tone was scathing. "An' made from the hair of women an' such killed by that murderous varmint."

Few men knew of the mixed strains that were merged to make a fighting machine of the Pablo Roja's—the quickness of the Indian, fused with the iron nerve of a half-wild Basque. Few knew with what love and reverence these half castes of the Santa Maderas held their dead warrior, Cochise. If the teamster had known, he would not have died on the porch of *Brion's Saloon.*

Just below the town of Murphy, the Rio Grande rolls a turgid path through the level mesquite land. The toiling river staggers once, then quickens and races through the Santa Madera Mountains. The Chiricahuas live deep behind the peaks, these now scrawny descend-

ants of Cochise mingle with the half-caste Spanish and Basque sheep-herders. That the warrior blood of Cochise still lingers, that the warpath against the United States Dragoons left a spark of hatred in the blood, is evident from the sudden rise of Pablo Roja. This killing machine of the Santa Maderas was the issue of a Chiricahuas mother and a squat Basque father, killed by his Indian wife in a drunken fury. Pablo Roja, seeped in the mysticisms of his tormented ancestry, his heavy blood fighting the lowland heat, now climbed from his lathered horse to answer the sneered insults of the teamster.

The gun came out of its holster with a whisper, and the blue barrel was pointed coldly into the midsection of the teamster, who was suddenly struggling to snatch at his own weapon. Pablo had time for one full step forward before his gun blast ripped into the man's shirt. The powder burn was swiftly covered by gushing blood.

The saga of Pablo Roja and his magic gunbelt, began with that single shot on the town of Murphy's sunbaked street. Wanted posters proclaimed his story, adding to his stature as much as the sudden raids on racing stagecoaches, or the burning of lonely Wayside Houses. Raid followed raid, and the gang of half-castes holed up in the Santa Maderas. Posses followed into the foothills but were turned back in the tall canyons by defiant bursts of gunfire. The settlers began to wonder if the bedeviled, or bewitched, belt of human hair, weighted down by its thunderous Colt, could really be protecting the monster of Santa Maderas.

The governor finally pledged a personal reward of five thousand dollars for the death of the bandit with the gunbelt fashioned from human hair. Pablo, lolling behind his rock fortress, laughed his disdain for this official decree.

SHORTLY afterward, in a moment of bravado brought on by heavy Tequilla, Pablo Roja offered a reward of his own. It was scrawled on the dried skin of a goat—scrawled in dripping blood and posted on the batwings of *Brion's Saloon.*

Brion had tipped his eye glasses back on his shock of frosty hair and read the proclamation aloud.

" 'I, Pablo Roja, invite the gunfighters of the gringos to meet me. The governor has placed a sum of five thousand dollars on my head. Let the gringo who is foolish enough, or willing to fight for the governor's reward, enter through the western approach to the Santa Maderas. He will be escorted into my presence. We will duel in any manner desired. The man will be granted free passage in and, if he is the victor, free passage out. The governor will be permitted to witness this duel and his safe passage will also be granted. Signed, Pablo Roja...' "

A "gringo" leaned down over his fire and pushed the coals together with a branch of mesquite. The glow from the coals etched into the fine lines of his face and the reflection gave a red cast to his narrow eyes. Behind him, the Santa Maderas reared their rocky walls, cut by one dark canyon known as the western approach. The moon laid a silver glint to his yellow dust coat and a shine to his greased boots but disappeared against the man's coal black hat. His white horse, tethered by a dragging hackamore, raised its snowy head and neighed. An imperceptible quiver shook the tall man's shoulders, but he continued poking his fire together.

The gleaming black muzzle of a rifle barrel reached over a rock and the sibilant hiss of running feet caused the white man to rise. He was very tall. His dust coat etched his bony frame smoothly except for a single bulge at the waist.

"Attend!" It was a sharp order in Mexican. The rifle barrel steadied on the rock. "Turn about, Padrone!"

The man at the fire turned and an-

other question barked from the darkness. "What is it you want?"

"The proclamation," began the cloth-coated man. "The proclamation of Pablo Roja."

"Ah—es verdad. You have come for the challenge? You will fight Pablo?"

"Yes, I will fight Pablo," was the answer.

"Take his guns!" The order came sharply and the shuffle of feet edged through the sand.

"Is the great Pablo so afraid that he must disarm his opponent?" The man's words rang out clearly.

"No!" The word jumped harshly and the slithering feet stopped their approach. "You are right; leave the gun alone." The voice turned and the words blunted queerly from out of the darkness. "You are a brave man, Senor. Now, mount your horse and we will escort you."

THERE were three distinct levels to the bandito's town. A narrow sloping street, covered by fine black lava dust that gritted under the horses' hooves. The rising sun touched the higher buildings perched in the crags above the street and leaving the next level in the deep shadows of the overhang. The houses, braced by huge rock foundations and balanced around a large Cantina, set squarely in the middle of the street, forcing the roadway to straddle its squat frame.

The three bandits flanked the white horse and its tall rider. They reined up in front of the Cantina and tied their horses to the peeling log of the hitch rail. The crowd of curious halfbreeds, spaced by an occasional Indian, gathered and stared darkly at the tall man.

He let his eyes, now green in the bright sun, wander over their impassive faces. "Where's the mighty Pablo?" The question rapped out. "Hiding behind some squaw's skirt until someone shoots me in the back?"

A furious curse errupted from the dark doorway and Pablo's squat body hurried out onto the packed earth. His vest flapped in his haste and the brown gunbelt, its human hair carrying a live sheen, bounced with anger.

"This is the mighty Pablo Roja," he snarled and his broad face carried all the hate of a hundred years of warfare.

"I have come in answer to your insulting proclamation..." began the challenger.

"Its words were meant to be insulting. That some cringing gringo would gamble for the reward. Its words..."

"Then set the terms!" said the tall man and stepped carefully from the saddle.

"It is you who have the honor of making the terms of the duel."

"Sixguns at twenty paces." The answer was crisp.

"Ah, so I thought. Guns, the fast draw; it is the pleasure of the gringo. Not the knife that cuts into the flesh. The pride of the gringo insists on the guns: he has not the courage, perhaps, to meet knife with knife?"

With the speed of light itself, the bandit let the polished black gunbutt leap into his stubby hand. The gun exploded as it came out of the holster, the bullet struck the white horse and the animal reared and dropped.

"*That* is what you want?" the words were a sneer. He holstered the still smoking gun and rubbed caressing fingers across the glossy hair on the belt.

"Yes; sixguns at twenty paces."

"The governor hires killers with the scratch of a pen. He has not the courage even to witness your death. You are ready?"

"Yes."

The twenty paces were solemnly measured off by a dark visaged aide of the bandit. Pablo gave rapid instructions.

"This man will go free if he can outshoot Pablo." The aide nodded. The speaker turned to the dust-coated man. "You prefer to be buried here, or your body sent to the governor?"

"Jabber!" The tall man's voice was curt. "Just jabber. I will *not* die."

The crowd quieted and furtive glances were thrown toward the peaks. "No?" the word was a sibilant hiss.

"No!" With a swift movement, the tall man suddenly threw back his coat. Laced around his lean waist was a belt —a belt of braided hair—the twin of the belt encircling Pablo's own thick waist. "This—" the challenger touched his middle—"is the *real* article. Yours is an imitation, braided from the hair of dead Indians rotting in their graves. Cochise, an honorable man, presented me with this belt."

Pablo's eyes narrowed, he moved closer in surprise.

"Your eyes close, to hide their fear!" snapped the tall man. His voice gained force. "Look about you, Bandit; your people are doubtful. Look into the tall peaks. Once more stare at the sky. It will be the last time you see them. Now, let us proceed."

WITHOUT further words, the men placed themselves at the markers. Twenty feet of black lava dust lay between. The chunky bandit ran clawing fingers over the hair-belt, aware that the assembled spectators were doubtful. He shouted, "This will be proof!" and pulled the gun.

Quickly, all eyes turned toward the white man. He had his gun out and aimed. Pablo fired, and the slug whinned its thunderous oath, followed by a second slug that raced toward the mountain peaks.

The challenger's aim had been sure and Pablo's great body turned and pitched. Red gushed from his waist, spreading like a thin lacquer over the glossy hair of his belt.

The pistol in the tall man's hand smoked. He glared down then, with a slow step, walked toward the fallen bandit. The stunned townsfolk moved a step closer as the white man spoke.

"Can you hear me, Pablo Roja? This path of destruction you have followed was wrong. Cochise made peace, honorable peace held in sacred trust since his death— Honorable, until you broke his trust. Do you understand?"

"Si—" came the faint answer in a pitched whisper. "You—are—free." Pablo's glazed eyes turned to the solemn faced aide and stayed there until he got a nod of agreement. "The reward—gringo man? The reward—from the governor?"

The tall man bent closer and shook his graying head. "You don't seem to understand. *I* am the governor."

★

2 Thrilling Novelets of Worlds To Come

MOON DANCE ..... **Wallace West**
Earth had a problem with radioactive wastes, and the moon seemed to be the ideal dumping ground. But the Lunar colonists objected . . .

DESPERATE REMEDY ..... **Mack Reynolds**
The disease might strike at any moment, and when it did, madness would sweep the ship. But a little touch of murder might prevent it!

Featured in the current issue of

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Over the heart of the old drunk's shirt was a spot less faded than the rest, as though something had covered it from the bleaching action of the sun. The spot was sharply outlined; it was the shape of a star. And suddenly John Dawes realized that this sodden wreck was his father!

ONCE A LAWMAN

by Mat Rand

JOHN DAWES curbed his paint pony on the last rise of foothills overlooking Manzano town, and let his pale eyes feast upon familiar scenes. It was blistering hot up here, but he didn't mind. Out there, squat in a sea of fresh gramma, the town seemed to reel in the westering sun, its false-fronted clapboard buildings huddled together compactly. It had been a long time since young John had viewed that squalling community... his home town. And now he was going back, his youthful yearning to look behind the purple haze on the horizon satisfied.

Now as he unconsciously touched steel to his horse and sent him sliding down the slant of the hill, a slight grin softened the walnut angularity of his face. Anticipation made his keen eyes smile. Never before had Manzano Valley seemed so beautiful as it did now. And in town...Lordy...wouldn't ol' Bob Dawes be knocked out of his dusty boots at sight of his son high-stepping down the main street.

Even the paint horse between John's legs seemed to gather the youngster's spirit to be home. Patches hedgehopped over low boulders and clumps of cat-claw and pointed velvet nostrils toward the smell of cool water and oats.

John drank in the valley and his roving eyes sought the familiar rectangle, miles long and as many wide, that was his old home range...the Box D. It had been, and still was, he could see, one of the most fertile spreads in central New Mexico. It had been pioneered by his father, Ol' Bob ...hacked out of a raw, new land. He

looked with pride upon the old homeland. It would be something to lounge around there for a month with the best of company...fine horses and cattle ...and his dad...whom the citizens of Manzano long ago had called to the service of the law, pinned a badge on his broad chest and pointed him out as the squarest, shootin'est lawdog in Pueblo County. But all that was before John had gone away, and he had been absent longer than he liked to think about.

Even as he rode down off the last pitch of the hill he could see that the cattle on the Box D were fat and sleek as ever. A warm feeling made him glow at thought of taking his rightful place as foreman of the spread...ramrod of the richest cattle ranch in a week's ride in any direction. And just ten days ago he had been just another cowhand at thirty a month and chuck on a Big Bend spread, when the insatiable desire to go home seized him. Still, he had left plenty of fun behind him and he had learned the three R's of other ranges to match his own... readin', ridin' and 'rythmatrigger. It had been a year well spent. He had left his mark from Laramie to Del Norte. Now...

He couldn't get home fast enough. His wide, plaid-covered shoulders were squared. The clean but faded levis encasing his powerful legs were neatly cuffed over the tops of his spike-heeled half boots. His long-shanked spurs jangled musically as he rode. The perfectly balanced forty-fives at his lithe thighs showed the pride of a man for his guns. In the worn holsters they were spotless, the pearl grips glinting fire in the slanting sun.

And almost before he realized it, he was hitting into the outskirts of Manzano, then loping around a corner onto the main street. Now at close quarters, the town looked anything but a place to get homesick for. The buildings were unpainted and warped. But John remembered it as home and that was all that mattered. Here he would find old friends and make new acquaintances. Most of all...he would find his dad.

John Dawes' face was like that of a ten-year-old lad getting his first rifle. He raked the whole street in a glance in search of Ol' Bob standing under some awning gossiping with a crony or two. Time hadn't changed the town. It was the same as when he had left. A new saloon down the way, a new sign painted on the window of the old one to meet competition, a new pine hitching rack before the general store. His leathery face spread in a grin; the gossipy oldsters must have finally whittled their way through the old rack.

He slid from the saddle before the *Cimarron*, the old saloon, planted his feet wide for a good look down the street. One thing he hadn't seen that he was burning up to see; where was Bob, anyway? Where was that familiar silver star, so worn that it was half brass?

He'd know him in a second; his big, stocky frame; gray hair crisp beneath a faded, black, flat-top sombrero; face copper-brown and probably smiling.

HE STARTED walking down the boardwalk towards his dad's office. It was just after he had passed the *Yellow Dust Saloon* that the commotion broke out. Three quick shots split the quiet somewhere inside the new saloon, seemed to slam the doors open with the concussion. A big man, paunchy and red-faced, lurched through the bat-wings, a six-shooter in each fat paw.

He was roaring drunk, unbelievably drunk, pitifully drunk. So drunk the waddy wondered how he kept upright. He barely stayed on his feet. He stumbled to the middle of the road and planted his legs wide like a frontier Colossus. He began to bellow like an angry longhorn.

"I'm a man-eatin' horn' toad!" he blustered. "I'm the toughest hombre

in twen'y states. I kin outshoot any damn' gunslick in the world! I'll take on you tinhorn catamounts ten at a time!"

John, almost without realizing it, was palming both his guns. The action came instinctively to the trouble-seasoned cowpoke. He leaned back against the wall of the saloon to watch the drunken man. Not from curiosity, but to make sure that neither he nor any other innocent bystander collected a slug from those six-guns.

There was no amusement on John's face, as there might have been. He got no kick out of seeing a man this drunk; there was something weak and flabby about such a sight, that sickened him.

Abruptly the drunk's guns went off. But though the man had aimed at a store-front when he fired, there was no answering splintering of wood. A vague disturbance puckered the waddy's forehead.

He glanced aside, to notice that a dozen men were in front of the *Yellow Dust,* now, watching the spectacle with grins on their faces. Most of the faces were new to him. Someone laughed. "The damned old drunk would of killed a dozen men by now if Lander didn't pull the teeth outa his slugs! Lookut the old fool!"

John glanced back as new ravings came from the drunk.

He was facing them, shouting belligerently, thickly, "Come on, yuh tinhorns! Ain't no man match fer me?"

A big, sinewy man with a checkered vest that was sizes too small for him, and arms that could have encircled a hogshead, shouted back, "I'll go yuh, feller. Bare fists, though. Come an' get it!"

The hulk in the center of the road poked his guns back into their holsters and stumbled towards the challenger, winging as he came. His old black pants were sagging low on his hips, the shirttails of his blue shirt were out. John watched him pityingly, leathering his guns as he realized he was harmless.

And then, in a flash, he was standing rigid as a dry yucca, every nerve taut, his face blanching. He was staring at the front of the oldster's blue shirt. Over his heart there was a spot on the blue denim that was much less faded than the rest, as though something had covered this from the bleaching action of the sun. The spot was sharply outlined; it was the shape of a star!

"My God!"

The words were wrung from the ranny's heart, though it was his lips that uttered them. He was sick; violently sick, with a sickness that no medicine could cure. He was watching his father stumble about before a crowd of hooting trash, looked down on by them as though he were an idiot. Looked down on by them!

Bob Dawes—barrel-chested, shaggy-headed Bob Dawes—the strongest, squarest, soberest man in New Mexico, was being egged on by men not fit to clean his guns.

But—was this his father? A moment's doubt made him lean forward tensely. It couldn't be. This man was pale, paunchy, marked with the stamp of the chronic alcoholic. He wore the badge that could not be taken off so easily as a star; the badge that is gained by living, and erased by dying. The mark of the man whose courage comes in a bottle, at so much per quart.

This man was heavy with soft fat, where his father was huge with hard muscle. This man—was a helpless drunkard!

Then he saw the silver Box D on holsters, and he knew it was his father. For just a second his square shoulders slumped. There was a moist film over his eyes, a hot, salty mist. Shame brought the color back to his face.

The ex-sheriff of Manzano stumbled on until he confronted the grinning giant. He swung a terrific roundhouse right with his knotted fist. The blow

missed, spun him about, threw him on his side on the ground. Instantly the man in the checkered vest aimed a kick at his ribs. The solid thump of his boot-toe digging Dawes' side was plain.

It was punctuated by a gasp of pain from the drunken man. He got to his hands and knees and dragged himself away pitifully. Bob Dawes pleaded childishly, "Aw, cut it out, will yuh, Rance? Cut it..."

The plea was terminated by a second kick that sent him flat on his face in the dirt. The big man lay there helpless, shaken by drunken sobs. Suddenly a flash of brown, angry lightning slid in between the two.

JOHN DAWES' fist smashed into Rance's laughing lips and knocked him backwards. He charged after the giant bully, a hundred and sixty pounds of outraged cowpoke.

Rance ducked out of his path and squatted into a crude fighting posture. He met John's next rush with a left and a right to the brisket. The blows threw the lighter man back as though ropes had yanked him, but the pain was unfelt. There is no room for pain in a mind completely filled with rage. He bounced back on springy legs and commenced throwing fists at Rance so fast that he covered up as though a hail of bullets were peppering him.

Rance grunted as a blow took him on the ear, speared John with a frantic jab. A cut opened over the cowpoke's eye and poured a red film over it. Another unexpected shot connected squarely with John's solar plexis. His shoulders slumped and pain-lines shot through his face. He shook his head, took a deep breath, sprang back.

Rance was slower as the effect of the buzz-saw attack was felt in his husky body. A vicious blow over his heart caused him to clench his fist over that spot. The second his guard was down John whipped in a flesh-splitting hook on his cheek. Rance straightened up, dazed. Another fist sank into his relaxed midriff and doubled him up. A final roundhouse right crashed into the side of his head and sprawled the giant senseless on the ground.

Panting, white-faced, John Dawes turned to his father. Bob was swaying on uncertain legs, his face the perfect vacuum. He didn't know his own boy, didn't know why this stranger had taken his part.

John grunted, "Come on, Dad. We're goin' home."

Then he turned to confront the seven men who stood on the boardwalk. One of them he recognized as Sid Lander, who had been a small-time gambler when he left. Lander showed all the outward signs of prosperity—striped silk shirt, tailored pants, new boots. A diamond was bright against the shiny blackness of his stock.

Dawes grasped the oldster's arm and commenced guiding him past the group. He turned to snap at Lander, "I don't know who's the cause of this, but I'm comin' back an' I'll find out. Whoever's tuh blame had best be oilin' up leather while he waits."

Lander's tongue flicked over fleshy lips, but he didn't answer. One white hand reached up to adjust the knot of his tie. As the pair went down the street he wiped his hand across his mouth; he whistled s o u n d l e s s l y through pursed lips.

"Hell-on-wheels!" he gasped. "John Dawes' back! God a'mighty, at a time like this!" He turned and strode hurriedly into the saloon.

THAT WALK through the street to the little shack where the old sheriff was living marked the most humiliating point in John's life. At his side, half dragging him, half shoving, lurched the drunken wreck who one year ago had been his idol. It was night before he could sober Bob up enough to get a coherent word out of him. He let him sleep for five or six hours, and when he awoke he made

him put down half a dozen cups of strong coffee.

After a while he had his father sitting quietly on the broken-down bed, while he sat on the window sill and tried to think. Night sounds came into the quiet room from the warm darkness: the brief hoot of a desert owl; horses' hoofs clopping on the road; a piano tinkling in one of the saloons.

"Dad—" John started and then hesitated. "—How—how did you ever get started?" he managed.

Bob stared down at his feet, wagging his great head slowly. "I don't know, boy. You know, yoreself, I've never been a drinker. Oh, I'd take a friendly drink when one uh the boys'd want me to, but—oh, hell, I don't know what's got inter me!"

"When 'd yuh start?"

"Musta been just after yuh left fer Mexico. I cain't even remember gittin' drunk fer the first time. Just sort uh—drifted inter it, somehow."

"Done all yer elbow-bendin' at the *Yellow Dust?*"

"Shore. Only place I kin git drinks free. An' God knows I got tuh have 'em!"

The cold hands of apprehension squeezed at John's vitals. "What—what's wrong at the ranch? Who's runnin' it?"

"Shore, John, I—I—" Bob Dawes' hand went up with his old, old gesture of rubbing his star. He seemed to shrink a little more at not finding it there. "John, I..."

The boy's heels hit the floor with a bang. He strode across the small room and towered over the shaking man. "Dad! Yuh sold us out?" His eyes blazed accusation, anger, almost.

"John, I ain't shore uh that, even! I been in a fog uh rotgut fer so long I don't know which end is up on anythin' but a whisky glass. I do know that Sid Lander owns it now, though. I must uh signed it over tuh him. Mebbeso he paid me fer it, I dunno. I been soakin' up enough likker tuh float a

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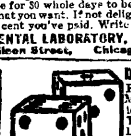
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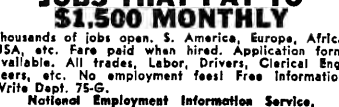
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"Hell's afire, man—you sold the Box D? Sold out a fifty thousand dollar ranch fer whisky dollars?" John couldn't move for sheer stupefaction. The Box D sold. Given away, maybe. The ranch that Bob's dad had started with four head of cattle and had run up to a dandy little spread. The ranch that Bob himself had worked up to the most profitable range in hundreds of miles. He had had plans about making it still bigger, himself; but those were over now.

Then he was moving swiftly. He yanked his guns out and twirled the cylinders. Guns in hand, he snapped, "Bob, it ain't likker you're cravin'—it's dope! Down Juarez way the Mex saloon keepers have a cute little way tuh stimulate trade. They dope their drinks until a man's got tuh come to 'em!

"That's what that sidewinder, Lander, has been doin' tuh you!"

"No, John—that ain't it!" Dawes was on his feet, one shaking hand out to stop the boy. "It's jist me, John. I've jist let myself become an ol' soak. Sid Lander's been nice about feedin' me an' housin' me, an'—an' furnishin' me with likker."

"Yeah—a real hoss trader. Swappin' a few bottles uh Piute poison fer the best ranch in New Mexico! Dad, there's gonna be a new grave in boothill tomorra. An' it's gonna fit Sid Lander like it was made fer him!"

THE TOE-TAPPING jangle of a piano came through the slats of the swing doors of the *Yellow Dust*. Light fell in golden bars across the boardwalk, gilded the dusty boots of the man who stood before it. He flexed his shoulders, loosened his guns in their leather.

One look at the business on his face

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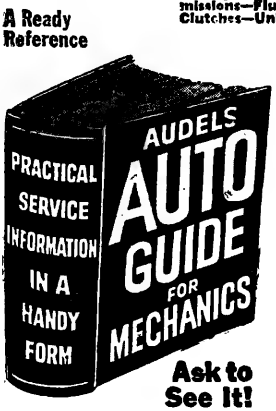

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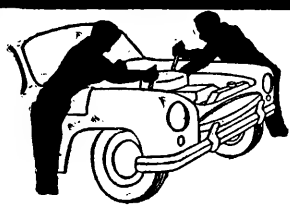

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and a timid man would have made a dive for the rear end of the bar. He parted the doors and stood there holding them back, squinting through rocking strata of blue and gray smoke. Finally he walked in and let them wing back and forth in shortening arcs.

John stalked to the bar. He caught the attention of the barkeep. "Where's Lander?" he snapped.

The fat, bald-headed man shrugged. "Out," he replied.

"Dead shore?" the cowpoke pursued. "You'd best be dead shore, as be a dead barkeep. How about it?" He patted his guns significantly.

The man seemed to believe he meant it, this time. He swallowed, shook his head positively. "Ain't no profit in lyin' tuh you, mister, I reckon. Lander ain't here." He grinned.

John looked around to assure himself the man was telling the truth. He saw the big man in the checkered vest at a table, considerably bruised about the face. It reminded him that his own left eye was in pretty bad shape.

Finally he turned back to the barkeeper. "If yuh see Lander," he snapped, "just tell him John Dawes got somethin' fer him. An' tell him if he doesn't want to collect it, he'd better be sure and have his leather plumb well oiled and his trigger-finger good and limber."

HIS FATHER was asleep again when he returned. He was snoring hugely and sprawled all over the mussed-up bed. John stared down at the drawn white face, the flaccid hands, the faded star on his heaving breast. This was the man who had been boss of the Box D. And, though his whole being was sick even at sight of him, there was some consolation in knowing that it had been no fault of Bob Dawes' that he was the cruel caricature of a sheriff that he now was.

[*Turn To Page* 90]

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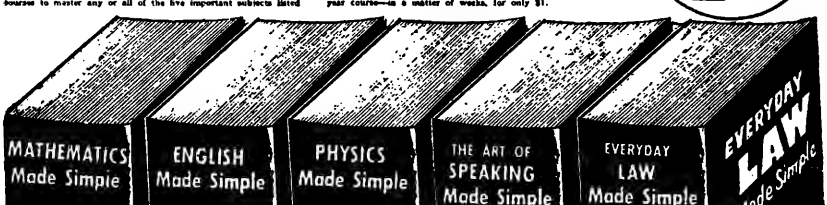

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"Not so fast, Old-timer," he said good-naturedly. "If yuh got tuh have likker, it ain't gonna be at the *Yellow Dust*. Here—"

He got the bottle he had thoughtfully provided the night before, knowing Bob would need it badly when he awoke. He poured him what would have amounted to a tall one a year ago, but which was now only a teaser. Bob felt better after it.

When the hasty breakfast was finished, the boy buckled on his heavy six-guns and got his hat. "Dad," he said, "I hate like poison tuh have tuh do this, but you're in no condition tuh be runnin' 'round loose. I'm going out to the Box D tuh look fer Lander, an' you're gonna stay in the house while I'm gone."

"Shore, John," the oldster agreed readily.

John shook his head. "It ain't that I don't trust yuh," he told his father. "It's the dope I don't trust. So I've got tuh lock yuh in while I'm gone." At the look of disbelief, of hurt, in the old man's face, he added quickly, "Dad, you're as good a man as ever was, but this stuff's got yuh in a reg'lar grizzly bear hug. Till we kin straighten yuh out, yuh've got to let me run things. I ain't gonna be gone long, so don't go gettin' het up."

After he had locked the door behind him, he got some nails and hammered them into the window sash, so that the old man was really in to stay.

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[*Turn To Page* 92]

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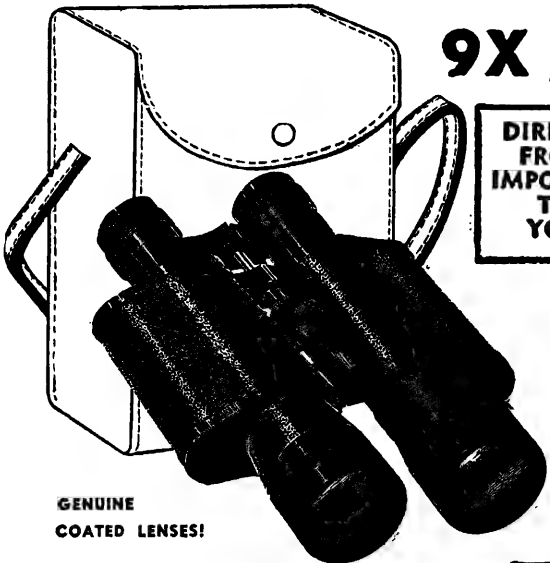

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side the gate and rested in the saddle, looking with smoldering eyes at the familiar sights.

This was—had been—his home. Like the town itself, it hadn't changed. The five light brown adobe living quarters, set random fashion like match boxes tossed carelessly, close to each other; the big oaks shading the houses from the summer heat; the corral in which their horses stood sleepily in the shade, heads bowed. Everything was the same but the owner, and when he caught up with the gambler, that might be changed, too.

A pair of hard-faced waddies came to meet him. They were short and heavy, with blocky shoulders and bowlegs. Both of them carried iron. John was glad he had his own guns as he noticed the leather thongs that clamped the holsters to their thighs.

He snapped, "Where's Sid Lander?"

The pop-eyed waddy who seemed to be the foreman crossed his arms. "He ain't here, son. Like to leave a message?" His eyes were mocking and hard.

"Any message I've got fer Lander will have tuh be delivered personal," Dawes snapped. "If it's all the same tuh you, I'll have a look around the place."

"It ain't, fella," the foreman said coolly. "If you're Old Man Dawes' younker, healthiest place fer you is away. Let's see how fast yuh kin make that spotted nag move, now—to'ards town."

John started to object. He saw, then, that both men had their hand resting on the butts of their revolvers. They meant to back up their order with gunsmoke. He had a sudden suspicion of more than that, too, as he looked into the surly faces.

Shrugging, he said, "Looks like it's dealer's choice an' you got the cards stacked, gents. Mebbeso I will be movin' on!"

HE WHEELED his horse around. In the next moment he raked a rowel cruelly across the paint's side. The horse whinnied with the pain of the sharp spur and leaped sideways, twisting and biting with flashing teeth. In that brief split second two guns roared.

His hunch was right: Lander's men had tried to drygulch him the moment his back was turned. But the slugs whistled over his head and gave him time to fling himself from the kak and strike the ground rolling.

He clawed his guns out of their holsters and triggered. The bursting roar of them came almost simultaneously with a scream from the waddy. He dropped both his pistols and clutched a shattered thigh, groaning. He stumbled aside and fell.

The foreman was down on one knee pulling a bead on John. His gun flashed, smoked, spun a slug through his vest where it hung from his body. The cloth jerked at him at the passing of the bullet.

John's lips were tight-laced, his eyes smoky. He thumbed back the hammers and fired all in one motion. No sound came from the foreman, but he knew his lead had found a home. There was shock and agony in the man's face as he hunkered back and let his arms drop. His hands scraped in the dirt, released the guns. There was no mark on him yet but a little ragged hole in his left shoulder.

John sprang up as feet pounded the dirt somewhere within the circle of houses. Lander was not there, he knew for sure now. If he had been, he would have been hiding somewhere close by to pull the cut-bank act on him.

He grabbed the reins and jabbed his foot into the stirrup, then swung into the kak and goaded his pinto into lightning action. He cleared the gate by the time the others tore up to the wounded men, firing a scattering of

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inexpert shots at him.

Soon his dust was settling back into the ranch yard, and he himself was miles up the road to Manzano.

The house was strangely quiet when he returned to town. Lights showed in the windows of almost every house but his. No sound at all answered him as he twisted the key in the lock, nor when he swung the door open and looked in. In a flash he was striding inside, anxiety tensing his face and causing his fists to clench.

He stood in the center of the shabby room and looked around. On his face was a strange expression, partly of apprehension and partly of rising anger. There was no sign of Bob!

He strode to the other door and tested it. Still locked. Then he noticed the window. It had been shattered and the glass scraped around the sill to break down the sharp edges. But the broken pieces of glass were almost all on the floor—not outside, where they would have been had the old sheriff broken the window from inside. Someone had come after him!

John Dawes scorned the door. He ducked through the window and started off down the street for the *Yellow Dust*. There was a powdersmoke showdown about to be staged there, and he was going to kick up most of the smoke.

NO ONE saw him come in. It was poorly lighted, and everyone seemed to be interested in a gray-haired figure at the bar. There were a dozen men clustered about the big man who was talking in a loud and alcoholic voice.

"Drygulch his own father, would he?" he blustered. "Steal the Box D right out from under my nose! If that hell-fired son uh mine ain't already lit a shuck, I'll blast him from here to Las Cruces when I ketch 'im!"

[*Turn To Page* 96]

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John slid down the wall into the shadows of a corner. No one had spotted him. For a moment he watched to see where the wind lay. Something had taken place here that rotgut hadn't fostered.

Then he saw Sid Lander back of the bar. He was smiling, showing a shining gold tooth as he levelled the bottle to spill a drink of throat-scalding brandy into Bob's glass. Dawes pounded the bar. "Hurry up with that likker, damn yuh!" he swore. "I'm the shootin'est sheriff in the country, an' I won't be kept waitin'!"

"Comin' up, Bob," the gambler announced. He turned his back on Dawes for a second, and in that brief motion John's eye caught the trick. A powdery cascade of white crystals slid into the drink from a paper he held.

A burning rage that made him as drunk as any brandy almost sickened the cowpoke with its galling intensity. As plain as a brand on a young steer was the thing that had happened. Sid Lander had to get rid of both of the Dawes', to keep the ranch. As long as either lived, it would not be safe for him.

He was inflaming the drink-dulled mind of the old man, making him believe his own boy had robbed him of the Box D. The bullets in his guns now, would not be blanks. He was pitting father against son, knowing that whichever won, here would be an opportunity for stray shots to finish the other!

Abruptly checkered-vested Rance was yelling, "There he is now, Bob! Tryin' to gun yuh from the back!"

Men spilled out of the way, leaving the two men face to face. The silence was tight as an overtaut guy wire, ready to snap at any moment.

"Don't reach fer 'em, Dad!" John bit out warningly. "They've been lying to yuh. Don't..."

"My own son stickin' a knife in my

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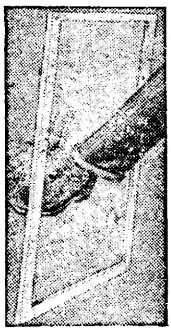

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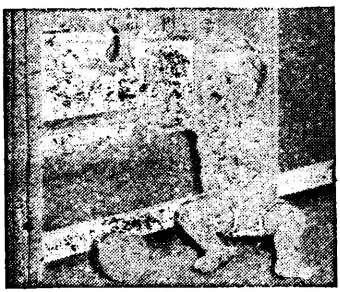
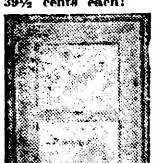


You can hardly see this TRANS-KLEER storm window—it's wonderfully transparent, yet it protects your loved ones from winter's frigid blasts. And each window costs only 39½ cents each!



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back!" Bob blurted. "Just like the dirty whelp he is!"

John's hand twitched over the butts of his guns as he saw his father finger cold iron. But he couldn't draw, couldn't take the risk. If he drew and fired at Lander, his father would kill him, for, drunk or sober, Bob was a dead shot. And if he waited until his father drew, tried to cripple him to save his own life, Lander would get them both.

But he knew that whatever happened, he couldn't shoot Bob. He'd take the slugs before that.

A breeze through the open window made the coal oil lamp overhead flicker. Like the guttering flame, an idea flickered in his mind, a way out—a hundred to one chance.

He sprang forward. His long right arm shot upward to smash one of the lamps. Then he was crashing full length onto the floor, ripping out his guns, shouting, "Dad! Get down low! Never mind the tinhorns—they been lyin' to yuh!"

Slugs bit the wood before his face as he thumbed the hammer of his six-gun at the other lamp. His shot slammed into it and sprayed coal oil and glass all over the floor.

He was rolling out of the way, clearing the barrage of shots that tore the planking into splinters where he had been. He lay flat on his face. Another orange flash winked, and he sent a slug roaring after it. Someone choked and gasped.

He heard a voice that sounded more like the Bob Dawes of a year ago than it did the wreck of the sheriff. It said: "I'm with yuh, boy!" He had come to his senses at last!

A fierce joy surged through John. Then he was triggering, triggering, blasting out a barrage of hot lead that put out two more of the flashes like candles blown out by a breeze.

Feet pounded as two of the gambler's gunnies made for the door. John hunkered there, waiting. Then, as the running forms were blacked in against the gray bars of the batwings, he cut them down.

There were only two of the gunmen left—Lander and probably Rance, for no shots had been fired at the corner where they had been.

HE WAITED in taut silence. His father crouched there somewhere in the dark, too. All of a sudden he dug in his pocket and scooped out a couple of matches. He scraped them along the floor and then flung them into the pool of spilled coal oil.

Dancing flames lighted up the whole place. Now he saw why Lander and Rance hadn't been shooting. They were sneaking out through a door in the rear of the place.

The two whirled as the light caught them. Bob Dawes saw them and straightened up, on hands and knees. He hunkered back, shouted, "Here yuh are, Lander! Here's pay yuh've well earned." Both .45's bucked just once, simultaneously.

Sid Lander lunged backward into the door jam, and his head hit it with a thump. He tried to raise his guns, but .44's are too heavy for dying arms. They hit the floor with a thud.

A shot from John pinned Rance against the wall, finished the last of the cutthroat gang.

John turned his sweating, grinning face to his dad. He said, "We did it, old-timer. We did it!"

Then they went out, the two of them, father and son, through the room that was fast catching fire. On the street, Bob turned to John. "Where now?" he asked.

"Back to the Box D," the boy told him. "For the next six months you're gonna do a lot uh restin' an' ridin', an' very little elbow-bendin'. After that, we'll see what can be done about gettin' a star fer that shirt, ag'in!"

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